The Tempest: An Analysis Of Power

Posted on January 30, 2020

View this essay online:
https://academic-master.com/the-tempest-an-analysis-of-power/

The following paper analyzes the aspect of power in the context of the famous play *"The Tempest."* It is a renowned play that was written by William Shakespeare in the era of 1610 to 1611. The story of this drama features the setting of an island that belongs to Prospero, a sorcerer and the legitimate heir to the throne of the island because he is the Duke of Milan. To get the restoration of the empire and to place his daughter Miranda in her rightful position, he uses the weapon of mirage and his cunning wits.

With his magical powers, he conjures a storm "tempest." This illusory storm strikes Antonio (brother of Prospero), and King Alonso of Naples perceives that they are stranded and become deserted on the island. This all hullabaloo leads to the unveiling of Antonio's culprit nature, and consequently, the King gets emancipation. In the end, the witty manoeuvring of Prospero brings Miranda to get a happy marriage to Ferdinand, son of Alonso.

Power as the Central Theme

Shakespeare employs multiple themes, motifs, and symbols throughout the play to sustain the inferential attribute of the plot. The charisma of colonialism, distinguishing the man from the monster, and the journey of seeking knowledge are all the core thematic aspects of *"The Tempest"*. However, the most prominent and primary factor of the story is "power"; this element is elucidated throughout the play from beginning to end. The dispositions are persistently practising their powers or pursuing power. This theme envelops the entire plot very artistically and is perfectly woven into the tapestry of the plot of the drama. The depiction of authority emerges even before the commencement of the play. In the prologue, Antonio uses the power that was entrusted to him only for administrative purposes. However, in an alliance with Alonso, Antonio banishes the rightful king Prospero from Milan. Further, he provokes Sebastian to assassinate the king in his sleep and to rule the throne of Naples. Similarly, Prospero seeks his lost power, and for this purpose, he does not hesitate to acquire the sorcery powers. He attains all the magical might of Sycorax to get back his dynasty. The core theme of the drama is based on the attainment of political power and the use of that to control and manipulate others.

Contested Authority and Political Instability

The opening scene of "*The Tempest*" demonstrates an eponymous storm, and throughout the rough conditions, the courtiers seek the orders of their rulers to determine what should be done in this catastrophic situation. The play addresses several questions regarding the origin, sources, and entitlement of power. It also highlights the aspects of authority transfer. Throughout the play, characters snatch strength from each other, and in this way, the setting always encounters political instability that leads to further anarchy of gaining power by violence. Take the instance of Antonio, who, with the assistance of Alonso, plotted the plan to take the ruling status of Prospero, further smoothing the way to provoke Antonio and Sebastian to make the plan to kill Alonso. Similarly, Prospero overthrows and enslaves the ruling power of Caliban and makes Caliban enraged enough to plan the revenge.

Power Through Master and Servant Relations

For the depiction of the power game, Shakespeare employs the concept of master and servant, and by using this relationship, he demonstrates different situations that can imbalance societal and political grounds. The interconnection between servants and masters is a significant factor that elucidates the attribute of power throughout the play. The disturbance that is stated among the masters and servants is a major part of the power-based theme of "*The Tempest*." Act 1 shows that there is a Boatswain named Trinculo passing orders to the passengers to take shelter in the times of a blowing storm. But the passengers were all from the noble class and never received orders, and therefore they were creating a mess by not cooperating, even in such severe weather conditions. Consequently, the ship sank just because of the unwillingness of the master passengers to follow the logical orders of the boatswain. At this point, he says, "Do you not hear him? You mar our labor: keep your Cabins, you help the storm." (Shakespeare, 5)

The Enslavement of Caliban

This element of power that is implicated through the relationship between masters and slaves can be exemplified by the instance that, before the arrival of Prospero and his daughter Miranda, Caliban was the only master of his island. However, after their arrival, Prospero takes control of the entire island and enslaves Caliban. At this point, he says, "Dull thing, I say so; he, that Caliban, and she that Sycorax, whom I now keep in service." (Shakespeare, 18) After the declaration of mastership over Caliban, Prospero further says to Miranda, "Shake it off; come on, I'll now call Caliban, my slave, who never yields us a thoughtful answer." (Shakespeare, 19) On the other hand, Stephano is a servant, but Caliban somehow makes him the master. This bizarre situation refers to the most disturbed and confused relationship between slavery and mastership that continues throughout the play.

Prospero’s Abuse of Power

Shakespeare also highlights the abusive nature of power usage through his protagonists. The most prominent instance of power abuse is Prospero, who misuses his influence when he takes control of the island once ruled by Caliban. He mistreats Caliban and shows no mercy or compassion for him, considering him a lesser and inferior creature. Prospero also depicts an immoral use of power when he promises Ariel to set him free, but even after completing his tasks, he keeps him in prison just for one more task. To remind Prospero of his promise, Ariel says, “Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains, let me remember thee what thou hast promis’d, which is not yet performed me.” (Shakespeare, 16) And Prospero says that “Ariel, thy charge. Exactly is performed, but there’s more work.” (Shakespeare, 16) This merciless behaviour of Prospero means that power gets on his mind, and he becomes an inhumane person who exploits others just for his sake.

Control Over Miranda

Moreover, it is also demonstrated that Prospero is not kind even to his daughter, as the power has taken control over him, and he wants a manipulative influence on everyone around him. To stay in power, he tries to evade the love Miranda feels for Ferdinand, and when she admits her feelings for Ferdinand, he reprimands her and asserts that she has met only three men, and this cannot be true love. By separating them, he wants to employ both of them for his personal interest. When they confess their true love, Prospero gets angry and says, “No more. Speak not you for him; he’s a Traitor, Come! Thou art my Prisoner and shalt be in Bonds. Sea-water shalt thou drink, thy food shall be the fresh-Brook-Muscles, withered Roots, And Husks, wherein the Acorn crawl; follow.” (Shakespeare, 69) Such instances affirm that the addiction to power makes Prospero blind, and he becomes selfish and ignores the happiness and prosperity of others in the course of retaining the power.

Caliban and Ariel as Instruments

Prospero has two slaves, and through their relationship, Shakespeare attempts to show a misuse of power as he utilizes their powers to attain his desires, and in return, he humiliates them and keeps them deprived of their fundamental rights. Prospero has a bright mind, but he uses Caliban’s strength to execute his revenge plot. Prospero uses his magical power to control the physical power of the monstrous Caliban, and therefore he becomes capable of compelling Caliban to do all manual toil for him. On the other hand, Ariel is delicate but has magical powers, and Prospero uses his brain to captivate and make Ariel assist him with enchantment. Before Prospero, Ariel was a servant pixie of the Sycorax witch. With Ariel’s magical power, he tames Caliban, and he soothes Ariel with false promises of freedom. In this case, Prospero utilizes both his brains and the brawn of Caliban and Ariel to do his physical and magical tasks. Through this notion, Shakespeare depicts that although Prospero has lost his rightful throne on the island, with his smart brain, he managed to rule over the other creatures.

Power and Obedience

Through many scenarios, it is also demonstrated that the kind and positive people are often tamed by the exhibition of great powers. Take the instance of Miranda. She is a gentle and compassionate girl, but as she is conscious of the mysterious might of her father, she tends to obey him. When Prospero conjures up a tempest, she pities the sufferers and says, “O, I have suffered from those that I saw suffer!” (Shakespeare, 5-6) Her concealed sympathies imply that her father is a powerful and cruel man, and there is no use in pleading with him to halt the suffering of the people by calming the stormy waters.

Titles as Claims to Authority

Evidently, the term “power” has a broad scope and can be utilized to describe various attributes in relation to their effect on each other. Likewise, “The Tempest” tells the maze of characters that are affected by the power status of one another and are riding on the see-saw of authority and slavery. Someone’s rise causes the downfall of others and vice versa. Throughout the play, Shakespeare focuses on the titles and tries to emphasize the truth that titles play a crucial role in the determination of power capacities. Even the title of the play itself alludes to a strength that alters the entire pattern of the ruling game. According to “The Tempest,” Stefano is the person who launches the system of titles on the island as the drama states that “[Prospero’s] daughter and I will be king and queen…and Trinculo and [Caliban] shall be viceroys.” (Shakespeare, 103) After this allocation, Stefano starts to pretend that he is the current Emperor who rules over Trinculo and the monster Caliban just because of his self-given titles. His assertion of self-assumed power can be comprehended by this dialogue: “The poor monster’s my subject, and he shall not suffer indignity,” says Stefano, suggesting that he has taken on a role (Shakespeare, 35).

Marriage and Political Restoration

“The Tempest” also suggests that when a person becomes obsessed with the ultimate power, every act of his will be conducted to retain the power and attain further control over everyone. Prospero generates a proper union to take back the lost empire, and for this purpose, he syncs with the physical power of Caliban and the magical powers of Ariel. He also uses the love relationship of Miranda and Ferdinand to strengthen his roots as a ruler. A critic, Kathryn Barbour, says that the unification of Miranda and Ferdinand was “absolutely necessary for Prospero’s project” (Barbour, 290). Miranda falls truly in love with Ferdinand and looks forward to having a cordial and official relationship, but Prospero sees this bonding as an opportunity to secure his position. Ferdinand is the rightful heir of the king of Naples, Alfonzo, and by knotting the wedlock of his daughter, Prospero wants to establish a firm stance as the ruler of the empire. To get a strong hold on Ferdinand, Prospero attempts to have a concrete grasp on Ferdinand and to ensure his dominance, he says to

him, “Remove some thousands of these logs and pile them up upon a sore injunction.” (Shakespeare, 11) By conducting such wicked tricks, he establishes a master-servant relation with Ferdinand to secure his prospective position without even entitling him in a particular manner.

Magical Coercion of Ferdinand

It is further described that Prospero uses different modes to stay in power. First, he utilizes the potential and strength of Caliban, Ariel, and Sycorax to gain control over the island. Moreover, he uses the affectionate relation of his daughter Miranda to impose dominance over the prince of Naples, Ferdinand, to make him a slave and to snatch his title. He asserts his power over the Prince as he says, “One word more I charge thee that thou attend me.” (Shakespeare, 457) Ferdinand denies the undue influence of Prospero and attempts to fight back, but at that point, Prospero again uses his magical powers and blocks the prospect of Ferdinand squabbling with him. As a consequence of this enchantment, Ferdinand becomes a servant of Prospero. Through this utilization of magical powers, he secures the future of Miranda and also provides her with a male partner who can offer lifetime security.

Mercy and Reconciliation

The cycle of the power game stops when, ultimately, Prospero decides not to seek revenge on Antonio, Alonzo, and Sebastian, and in this manner, the political stress comes to a halt. At this point, Prospero uses the power of mercy that unifies Alonzo and Prospero in a swift manner. After their unification, they strengthen the knot of their newly built relationship by happily arranging the marriage of their son and daughter. The restoration and the reconciliation of political and societal tyranny due to the compromising and merciful decision of Prospero assert that the positive use of power implies far better results than the negative and adverse usage of power. When Prospero employs his power through violence and unkindness, he creates an imbalanced political situation that, in turn, resists establishing order. Contrarily, when he selects the way of compassion and mercy, the problems get solved in a smoother way.

Shakespeare’s Vision of Power

The above-analyzed aspect of “The Tempest” assures that through the plot of this famous play, William Shakespeare highlights the nature of power by analyzing it with different aspects. He shows the improper usage of power by depicting the violent and unkind relationship between the master and slaves. He also states that the obsession with power makes a person addicted, and then he will agree to opt for any illegal and unjust way to stay in authority. On the other hand, Shakespeare restores all the chaos at the end by demonstrating the greatest power of compassion and compromise, and through it, he elucidates that these are the most efficient instruments to tackle political matters and can imply better and enhanced outcomes as compared to those violent and enslaved approaches. He

further tries to state that even magic is an inferior power when compared to the power of love and positivity.

WORK CITED

Kendall, Gillian Murray. Shakespearean power and punishment: a volume of essays. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson U Press, 1998. Print. doi 10.1353/shq.2001.0012

Shakespeare, William. The tempest. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 2001. Print.x: Penguin 2001.Print.
https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780198129172.book.1/actrade-9780198129172-book-1