

**Authority and Psychological Conflict in Prospero's Character:
A Psychoanalytic Reading of *The Tempest***

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Abstract: Prospero in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is a complex figure, and his authority is closely connected to psychological conflict, making him a fruitful subject for psychoanalytic analysis. The exiled Duke of Milan, Prospero, has complete control over the island, its inhabitants, and even the events of the play. Yet behind this display of power is a troubled mind, a mind forged by betrayal, loss, revenge and the need to regain what was taken. In this paper I will perform a psychoanalytic reading of the character Prospero, primarily through the work of Sigmund Freud and subsequent psychoanalytic critics.

This paper is an attempt to focus over the actions of Prospero as an expression of the subconscious mind especially the conflict between the id, ego and super ego. His obsessive desire for revenge on Antonio and Alonso is an illustration of his repressed rage and unresolved trauma, while his slow progression toward forgiveness is an embodiment of psychological reconciliation and self-actualization. This paper also looks at Prospero's relationships with Miranda, Ariel and Caliban as manifestations of his internal conflicts and his desire for power, control and emotional security. The research performs a close reading of key scenes and speeches and claims that the magical power of Prospero is a symbol of a psychological mechanism through which he tries to come to terms with feelings of dispossession and insecurity.

Ultimately, an attempt has been made to argue that Prospero's transition from revenge to forgiveness which represents a psychological healing process, thereby rendering *The Tempest* a profound meditation on authority, selfhood, and the complexities of the human psyche.

Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Authority, Psychological Conflict, Unconscious Mind, Revenge, Forgiveness, and Identity.

Introduction: William Shakespeare (1564–1616) is widely regarded as the greatest playwright and poet in the English language. The bard of Avon, the author of all ages, king of English drama who enriched English language with his thirty-seven plays, 154 sonnets and two narrative poems that have greatly influenced world literature. His works are universal in themes of power, ambition, love, revenge, identity and human psychology which makes them applicable for different historical periods and cultures. Shakespeare's greatness as a writer was his uncanny ability to develop complex characters and his profound psychological insight. As Harold Bloom observes, Shakespeare, in his unsurpassed depiction of human consciousness and self-consciousness, "invented the human" (xvii).

The Tempest is considered Shakespeare's last play and is important for its exploration of power, forgiveness and psychological change. Prospero's identity is defined by knowledge and intellectual power, as he states "Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me / From mine own library with volumes" (*The Tempest* 1.2.166-67). As the book, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* states: "Shakespeare's works are still relevant today because they deal with fundamental human experiences that are universal across time and place" (Greenblatt 11). Shakespeare thus continues to be profoundly relevant to modern literature, psychology, politics and cultural studies, demonstrating the importance of his artistic vision.

A psychoanalytic reading of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* reveals the psychological complexity of Prospero's acts and power. Suggested by the famous psychologist that a lot of human behavior is caused by unconscious impulses, repressed feelings and unresolved conflicts (Freud 17). Prospero's obsession with the control of the island and the events shows his attempt to recover from the trauma of exile and treachery. For example, in betraying Antonio he experiences the inescapable presence of former wounds in his psyche, "Awakening an evil nature" (*The Tempest* 1.2.93).

Freud's theory of the unconscious may offer an explanation for Prospero's desire for revenge. His ultimate forgiveness demonstrates that rational self-control has won over destructive impulse. The famous Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist believes, "psychological growth is achieved through the unification of opposing parts of the self" (Jung 275). In this frame Ariel and Caliban stand for the two sides of Prospero's personality, the civilized and spiritual self and the instinctive and rebellious self. Prospero's struggle with these inner conflicts leads to self-awareness and reconciliation. Thus, *The Tempest* deals with authority not merely as a political

power but also as symptom of deeper mental problems. Thus, Prospero is one of Shakespeare's most psychologically complex characters.

Prospero, the main character of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, symbolizes authority, knowledge and mental struggle in a very strong manner. He is the exiled Duke of Milan, ruling the island by magic and intellectual superiority, and he seeks to repair the political order shattered by his brother's treachery. His authority is obvious as he remembers his suffering in the past: "Thy father was the Duke of Milan and / A prince of power" (*The Tempest* 1.2.54-55). The statement is a reflection of his need for legitimacy, and his ties to a previous identity.

Prospero has been universally acknowledged by critics as one of Shakespeare's most psychologically complex characters. Prospero's power is his ability to manipulate and dominate stories, in the political and in the personal, Stephen Greenblatt argues (289). Prospero's magic, according to Frank Kermode, is a form of intellectual and psychological power, which he controls as he tries to impose order and self-mastery (xlv). But underneath that authority is emotional vulnerability, anger and a desire for reconciliation. Shakespeare uses Prospero to explore the connection between power and the human mind. He demonstrates how authority can be used for self-healing and moral change.

Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is one of the most complex of his later romances, with themes of authority, revenge, reconciliation and psychological transformation. The play takes place on an enigmatic island and follows Prospero's journey from anger and revenge to reconciliation and self-discovery. He demonstrates his control of the island in his words to Ariel, "Hast thou, spirit, / Performed to point the tempest that I bade thee?" (1.2.193-194). He has a complete mastery of the natural and supernatural.

Critics have read *The Tempest* as a play of internal and political strife. The play, for Northrop Frye, is a transition from chaos to order which ends in spiritual renewal (203). Prospero's magic is a symbol, as Frank Kermode also observes, of the human desire to impose order on chaos and to know oneself (xxxviii). These insights are suggestive that the play reflects both external power and the psychological processes of healing and reconciliation. *The Tempest* is a rich field for psychoanalytic reading, as this play explores the human mind intensely in the developing Prospero.

An important framework for understanding the psychological conflicts in the character of Prospero in *The Tempest* is provided by the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. Freud explained human behavior by means of unconscious desires, repressed memories and unresolved emotional tensions (Freud 17). Prospero's behavior in the play shows that he is mentally suffering a great deal because he was

betrayed and exiled. His need for control and revenge is an example of what Freud termed the persistence of repressed feelings in the unconscious. Prospero's admission of his pain "My brother and thy uncle, called Antonio, / I pray thee, mark me" (66 - 67) is an example of how past trauma informs his present behavior.

Freud's concepts of repression and sublimation provide an explanation for Prospero's dependence on magic to regain his power and mental equilibrium. Another psychologist quoted in his book *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (1994) thus: "Psychoanalytic criticism tries to find the unconscious desires and contradictions that form the basis of literary characters" (Brooks 52). Similarly, literary texts often expose unconscious motivations for conscious actions (Norman N. Holland 44). In Freudian terms, then, Prospero is a character whose desire for power is indissolubly linked to his need to heal, reconcile and master himself.

Power is a major theme throughout Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and is most powerfully represented by the character of Prospero. Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan and the ruler of the enchanted island, exercises his power through knowledge, magic and the cunning control of others. His power is demonstrated when he commands Ariel:

Go make thyself like a nymph o' the sea.

Be subject to

No sight but thine and mine, invisible

To every eyeball else.

Go take this shape,

And hither come in't.

Go, hence with diligence (*The Tempest* 1.2.301)

Shakespeare's use of supernatural machinery showing his control over supernatural power and human affairs. But his authority is not only political, it is intimately connected to his craving to reimpose order after the trauma of betrayal and exile.

In fact, Stephen Greenblatt argues, authority in Shakespeare is often exercised through the regulation of the social and the symbolic, rather than through the exercise of physical force (64). Similarly, Frank Kermode says that Prospero's magic is a kind of intellectual power which he uses to impose order on a chaotic world (xxxix). Prospero's power can be understood psychoanalytically as a defense against feelings of vulnerability and loss. In this way, Shakespeare depicts authority both as a form of power and as a symbol of more profound psychological requirements, rendering Prospero a compelling example of a leader and an individual torn between the external and internal worlds.

Psychological conflict is an integral feature of the character of Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He is a great ruler who rules the island by magic, but he is painfully aware of his brother Antonio's treachery, and of the loss of his dukedom. His suffering appears in his description of how Antonio "whom next thyself / Of all the world I loved" (*The Tempest* 1.2.78–79). This memory is the cause of the emotional scars that still drive his actions and his desire for vengeance.

Psychoanalytically, Prospero's conflict is one between repressed anger and the wish for reconciliation. Sigmund Freud argues that unresolved emotional experiences are stored in the unconscious and continue to affect behavior long after the original trauma has taken place (Freud 21). For example, Carl Jung suggests that psychological development involves confronting and integrating the shadow aspects of the self (Jung 167). The process of inner conversion is exemplified in the case of Prospero, who transmutes from revenge to forgiveness. His final abandonment of magic is not a failure but a sign of psychological growth. In this way Shakespeare makes Prospero's power an integral part of his psychological struggle, making him a fascinating study of trauma, self-discovery and emotional recovery.

The psychoanalytical reading of the Prospero in *The Tempest* is based upon the unconscious mind. Sigmund Freud thought the unconscious was a repository of repressed desires, memories and emotions that still affect human behavior (Freud 23). Prospero's actions in the play show the term effects of betrayal, exile and suppressed anger. His memory of Antonio's betrayal "To trust like a good parent did beget of him / A falsehood in its contrary" (*The Tempest* 1.2.93–94)—indicates that unhealed emotional scars continue to affect his choices and practice of power.

Freud states that repressed experiences tend to return indirectly, in action and in symbol. In this sense, Prospero's magic may be interpreted as an externalization of unconscious desires for control, justice and restoration. In a similar fashion, Jacques Lacan claims that the unconscious is structured by language and symbolic representations. In this light, Ariel and Caliban can be read as symbolic projections of the split psyche of Prospero. Thus, the *Tempest* exposes the unconscious mind as a potent power that shapes Prospero's authority and psychological dilemma, exposing the complex interplay between repressed desire and conscious agency.

Revenge is one of the main psychological drives for the actions of Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Prospero's authority over the island is affected by emotional scars from his usurpation and deposition by his brother Antonio. He wants revenge, and this is shown when he admits that he created the tempest on purpose so that his enemies would be at his mercy. "Spirit! hast thou done / The tempest that I

bade thee? "He asks of Ariel (*The Tempest* 1.2.193–4). This statement suggests that Prospero's power originated from a desire to punish those who wronged him.

Revenge is a manifestation of repressed anger and unresolved trauma from a psychoanalytic point of view. Freud suggests that the repressed feelings are present in the unconscious and influence behavior through unconscious desires (Freud 28). Similarly, Peter Brooks argues that revenge narratives often reveal unconscious psychological conflicts and hidden emotional tensions (52). But Prospero's is a journey from vengeance to forgiveness. His refusal to take revenge is a sign of psychological growth and healing. *The Tempest* thus presents revenge as something other than revenge, as a process in which Prospero's journey towards self-understanding and reconciliation takes place.

Forgiveness is the culmination of Prospero's psychological journey. Initially he wants to take revenge against those who betrayed and banished him but at the end he realizes the futility of revenge and accepts reconciliation. This change is clear when Prospero says, "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (*The Tempest* 5.1.27-28). It is a radical move from anger and retribution to compassion and moral renewal, showing his psychological growth.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, forgiveness is the resolution of the inner conflict, the reintegration of repressed emotions. Freud explains that psychological health comes from dealing with and solving emotional tensions that remain, not being stuck within (Freud 32). Likewise, Erik Erikson states that personal growth stems from conflict resolution in the past and gaining emotional stability (Erikson 247). This process of healing, of self-mastery, is enacted through Prospero's act of forgiving Antonio and Alonso. In forsaking revenge and re-establishing social order, he finds psychological freedom. Thus, in *The Tempest* forgiveness becomes not only a moral virtue, but the highest form of Prospero's emotional and psychological transformations.

Identity play an important role in understanding Prospero's character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Antonio has betrayed Prospero and taken his place as Duke of Milan, and now he is trying to piece himself back together in exile. His identity derives from a multitude of roles: ruler, father, magician, victim of political injustice. Prospero's claim, "I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated / To closeness and the bettering of my mind" (*The Tempest* 1.2.89-90), shows how much intellectual pursuit was part of his identity. But his isolation also creates a conflict between his former political identity and his present existence on the island.

In psychoanalytic terms identity is constructed through the mediation of internal desires and social realities. According to Erik Erikson, identity is formed

through a continuous process of psychological integration and self-discovery (109). Jacques Lacan also suggests that identity is never stable but is constructed through symbolic relations and perceptions of the self (76). Prospero's eventual reconciliation with his past and restoration to Milan signify the recovery of a unified identity. So *The Tempest* is about identity as an active psychological process, constructed through loss, authority and personal change.

Conclusion: Prospero, the main character of this drama is one of the most psychologically complex characters in all of English literature. His authority is tied to his internal struggles. As a psychoanalytic study the play reveals the emotional wounds of betrayal, exile and loss of political authority that continue to drive Prospero's behavior. His needs to dominate, his desires for revenge, his reliance on magic are all manifestations of the work of unconscious desires and repressed emotions. Freud asserts that unresolved psychological tensions influence human behavior via the unconscious mind, which is a clear expression of Prospero's struggle for authority and self-mastery.

Different parts of Prospero's broken identity and psyche are revealed in his relationships with Ariel, Caliban, Miranda and his enemies. It is a journey from revenge to forgiveness, a journey of emotional healing and personal transformation. His final moral and psychological reconciliation is signaled by the line 'The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance' (*The Tempest* 5.1.27–28). Thus, the *Tempest* is not merely a political restoration drama, but a profound meditation on authority, identity and the unconscious. Shakespeare's ability to depict the complex relationship that exists between power and psychology is unparalleled, and Prospero becomes an eternal symbol of the human quest for self-realization, emotional balance, and peace of mind after hardship and conflict.

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