

## The Exploration of the “Trinity” Prototype in *The Tempest*

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### Abstract

The close relationship between Shakespeare and the Christian culture has been focused on in the academic world. Especially *The Tempest*, which is taken as Shakespeare’s “poetry will”, is full of rich implication of Christian elements. Basing on the *Myth Prototype Criticism Theory* and from the aspects of character image-building and plot structure, this thesis is devoted to exploring the specific presentation mode and the plot function of the Bible Prototype-“Trinity” in *The Tempest*. The paper attempts to prove that the main characters in *The Tempest* not only borrow the Biblical archetypes of characters but also apply the relationship of “Trinity” in the *Bible* in organizing “sin” and “redemption” plots.

**Key words:** *The Tempest*; Biblical archetype; “Trinity”

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### INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare is regarded as one of the greatest writers in the English and even European literary history. As Shakespeare’s family was Catholic, he was quite familiar with the text of the *Bible* and imitated a large range of literary genres used in biblical books. Helen Cardinal (2000), the modern English Shakespearean critic, has written in her book that some of Shakespeare’s

representative characteristics are relative to religious sensation and Christian concept. *The Tempest*, produced in the winter of 1612-1613, is one of Shakespeare’s brilliant romances. It is a story about sins and redemption. The main plot of this play is provided here: Prospero is the Duke of Milan and indulges in magic books. He leaves all the national affairs to his brother Antonio who is an evil, ambitious man. Antonio usurps with the help of Alonso and even means to murder Prospero and his three-year-old daughter, Miranda. Fortunately, with the help of the upright courtier, Gonzalo, they flee to a small, peaceful island where Prospero dominates Ariel and enslaves Caliban. Twelve years later, with the mysterious magic, Prospero creates a storm on the sea. Then a shipwreck occurs and all of the people in the boat fall into the sea.

Many other scholars have interpreted *The Tempest* from the dimension of Christianity. For instance, Dong Juan expounded this play from Christianity and Humanism. She said: “Owing to the certain historical and cultural background, Shakespeare’s works implicate dense meaning of Christianity and idea of Humanism.” (Dong, 2005, p.75). In the article *The Study of the Bible’ Influence to The Tempest*, Ge Lin set the impact of the *Bible* on *The Tempest* as an example to clarify that the quotation of Shakespeare’s works from the *Bible* was an instructive and exploratory proposition (Ge, 2009). Different from the former studies, this essay chooses a unique angle that the Christian “Trinity” is focused on. According to Frye’s *Prototype Criticism Theory* and from the perspective of text analysis, this thesis devotes to analyze the *Bible* prototype of the main characters in *The Tempest*. It suggests in the study that the main characters are all portrayed by regarding the characters in the *Bible* as prototypes and the relationships among those characters are organized according to the “Trinity” doctrine in Christianity.

## 1. SHAPING THE CHARACTERIZATION

### 1.1 The biblical characterization of "Trinity"

The so-called "Trinity" means that the property of God is the unity of the three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Father also refers to God who lives in heaven, possessing almighty power and profound knowledge that people lack. The Son is similar to Jesus who is a very gentle, kind and pure person with incomparable tolerance. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the "Trinity" of whom the purpose is to come to the world to glorify Jesus Christ and lead his followers into The Truth. He is the final completer of all things as well as the media for God to live with common people. In *The Old Testament of the Bible*, Jehovah is said to be the "Trinity" God and the word "God" is a plural noun in Hebrew. In the *Bible*, God calls himself "we". *The New Testament* indicates that God is the "Trinity" God: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (John 1:1). Here "Word" refers to Jesus. So "The Word was the God" suggests that the Father and the Son are two persons, but an entirety. During the process of Jesus' baptism, according to the *Bible*, the Holy Spirit likes a dove descending upon Jesus while a voice comes from heaven, saying "Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11). So God is the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

### 1.2 The biblical characterization in *The Tempest*

God is widely presented in Shakespeare's plays, generally disguised as a man. Prospero in *The Tempest* has many god-like or the Father-like attributes, which reflects the play's profound link with the *Bible*. Shakespeare moulds Prospero's image as a scholar, a man for whom his library in Milan is a large dukedom. Prospero creates a paradise on the island where he lives. He also makes a heavy storm on the sea to punish those guilty people. So he can be regarded as simultaneously the creator and destroyer, like the maker of Eden and the Flood. Besides, he is a judge, like God, giving all the others sentence at the tribunal. What's more, like God in Genesis, as the story comes to its ending, Prospero retreats from absolute rule to limited guidance. Both God and Prospero bequeath their descendants a promise that they would be prosperous. So a conclusion that Prospero functions as the Father of the "Trinity" could be arrived at.

Now it is the right time to give an explanation about why the Son is the archetype of Ferdinand. In *The Tempest*, Ferdinand is the son of the King of Naples, which is a very important point that should be noted because in the *Bible*, Jesus is the child of Maria and Joseph and he grows up among human beings. Like Jesus, Ferdinand lives with common people but possesses a noble status (he is the prince of Naples). In the play, he experiences a process which is similar to "death and resurrection" in the *Bible*. After the shipwreck, everyone

including Ferdinand's father, concludes that he has died in the sea. However, this is just Prospero's plan. Relying on his magic, he brings Ferdinand back to life. This scene is similar to Jesus' "death and resurrection". Under the arrangement of Prospero, Ferdinand meets Miranda, Prospero's only daughter, and falls in love with her at the first sight. Having passed tests of Prospero, Ferdinand is finally allowed to marry her. From this point, Ferdinand could be regarded as the son of Prospero; naturally he is the Son of the "Trinity" God. So Ferdinand functions as the Son of the "Trinity" in *The Tempest*.

## 2. SINS IN THE TEMPEST PRESENTED THROUGH "TRINITY"

There implied a variety of crimes in *The Tempest* and these crimes are shown up through Prospero, Ferdinand and Ariel. The original sin, fratricide, cursing, greed and betrayal are unfolded in the sight of readers through the media, Prospero. Ferdinand is a high holy figure, with the comparison between him and other evil men, the ugly faces of those sinners are exposed ruthlessly. Ariel is the victim and witness of sins in the play.

It should start from Prospero's role in the show of sins embodied in *The Tempest*. At the beginning, Prospero, the Duke of Milan, lives a happy, peaceful life in his palace. He leaves all the national affairs to his brother Antonio and his courtiers. He indulges himself in magic, which is an ideal world: no war, no disaster, no tragedy, nor any other shadow. However, Antonio destroys the peace through usurping Prospero's throne. Thereafter Prospero is exiled and the whole country falls into disorder. Actually it is reasonable to deem that Antonio eats the forbidden fruit that refers to his arrogation. If understanding from this level, Antonio could be thought to commit the original sin. Brotherhood rivalry can be reflected from the relationship between Prospero and his brother, Antonio. It is astonishing that Joseph's story bears so many similarities with that of Prospero. Brotherhood rivalry and ambition to get ducal power push Antonio to collude with Alonso to kill Duke Prospero. Besides, Antonio also incites Sebastian who is the brother of the King Alonso to murder Alonso to get the crown. This is fratricide, one of personal sins in Christianity. Other sinful actions exposed through Prospero include curse, greedy, betrayal, misunderstanding and so on. The crime of curse is represented through Caliban, the son of a witch. He curses Prospero ceaselessly because he could no longer do everything willfully after Prospero's coming onto the island; moreover, he must do all the hard labors for Prospero. However, being a vicious monster, he deserves what Prospero does to him. As for the greed, there are many reflections in the text from which a typical one is picked here. Trinculo and Stephano, one is a jester and the other is a cook. They are eager to possess supreme power

and marry a beautiful wife so they cannot withstand the temptation of Caliban. Evil then begins to bulging in their hearts which leads them in an attempt to kill Prospero and grab his daughter, Miranda, to get what they want. Though they fail finally, their sinful actions fully reveal their greedy.

### 3. BEING REFLECTED IN THE REDEMPTION

The three persons of "Trinity" are responsible for their own work: the Father undertakes the creation and maintenance work, the Son assumes the work of salvation and mediator while the Holy Spirit takes the work of enlightenment and sanctification in hand.

#### 3.1 The Biblical Concept of Redemption

The whole *Bible* is actually a history of human salvation. It is believed in Christian doctrine that sinners must repent before they get redemption. According to the *Bible*, by delivering his followers from sin, Jesus has brought them salvation (Luke1:77). The above quotations make it clear that all the people are sinners but they have the opportunity to get redemption on condition of their own repentance as well as God's salvation plan.

In the *Bible*, the redemption is carried out by "Trinity" God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ." (Ephesians1:3). It is noted from this lection that the Father loves his creatures and he is the provider and defender for his creation. His deep love for his children is reflected in "having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Ephesians1:5-6). So many lections cited here are all used to illustrate that the Father loves his children and he does everything to save them from sins.

The Son, Jesus, presides over the work of salvation and mediator. He comes to the world to complete his mission and suffers a lot during the process. It is his blood and flesh that save the sinners from the world. "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Ephesians1:7) could be an exemplification. Moreover, after losing life, Jesus reappears to the world to prove the truly existence of Christ, through which he aims to arouse the consciousness of repentance of those sinners. Ultimately they will be saved. In this sense, Jesus undertakes the work of being the mediator. The Holy Spirit is out of the Father and the Son, so in the entities of the "Trinity" he is endowed with a common essence and existence. The Holy Spirit is known as the spirit of God and the spirit of Truth. It is him who completes the work of enlightenment and sanctification. "And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment." (John,16:8). This is a

verse that proves the main mission of the Holy Spirit is enlightenment. "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth." (John,16:13). From this quotation, it becomes clear that the other important work of the Holy Spirit is sanctification. Through him, the awareness of Truth is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people. So far, the biblical concept of redemption has been analyzed and explained. In the redemption plan, the Father is the planner and defender; the Son is responsible for salvation and mediator; the Holy Spirit takes the work of enlightenment and sanctification.

#### 3.2 Redemption in *The Tempest* Practiced by "Trinity"

In Christianity, "sin" is not only a kind of wrong behavior, but also represents the alienation state between God and human beings. In the play, Prospero resembles the work of the Father who makes the salvation plan and puts it into practice in the *Bible*. What this short sentence suggests is that the shipwreck Prospero makes is within his scheme. The detailed depiction in *The Tempest* is provided here: the first act in this play is a boat which can be seen as the microcosm of human society swaying on the sea. All the people on the board are too terrified to scream and they pray to God to bless them from disaster. During the shipwreck process, Prospero ensures the safety of those people by using his magic. He just disperses them onto separate islands in order to complete his next plan. This is the right moment for Prospero to practice his redemption plan through awakening their atonement consciousness. Prospero works on the lords to create a situation in which the treasonous crime is recommitted by Antonio and Sebastian against Sebastian's brother, King Alonso. This action, to some extent, awakens Alonso's memory of having betrayed Prospero. Alonso falls onto the ground to acknowledge his crime and is willing to exchange his own life for his son's life which, he believes, has been taken away from him as a punishment. At the same time, Antonio and Sebastian admit their crimes. Then they get the opportunity to be forgiven.

The mission of the Holy Spirit is enlightenment and sanctification, so is Ariel. He does not practice the redemption plan on his own, but abides Prospero's direction. What he should do is to give assistance. Every time Ariel gains the order of Prospero, he will not like to spare any labors in Prospero's errands. So Ariel is in the position of completing obedience to his master. In the play, the most typical example of Ariel's enlightenment function is a vision. A series of magic scenes happens on the island are manipulated by Prospero but executed by Ariel. Through this direct way, people realize and must admit they are guilty. Once they admit they are sinners, they are believed to have the potentiality to repent and make a new start. Then Prospero gives them a chance to be new men. Herein Ariel completes his enlightenment task. In the play, there is an image that should be not

ignored—the sea, which is manipulated by Ariel. In fact, the sea suggests that the plot of this play begins with shipwreck, develops in trial and ends in calm. It is portrayed as a fair judge who makes everyone's soul revealed clearly when the heavy storm comes: the sailor's panic, the upright man's calm, the timid people's cowardice, the crafty man's fright. All these people can not escape from the trial of the judge. Eventually, the boat passes the tranquil sea to declare that Ariel completes his sanctification task.

From the above argumentations, it could be seen that the work of Prospero resembles the work of the Father who is the designer of redemption plan. All the events happened are not beyond his expectation. The work of Ferdinand is similar to the work of the Son who acts as the mediator. Through Ferdinand, not only his father, Alonso, gets salvation but also all of the other sinners are forgiven by dint of the marriage between him and Miranda. The work of Ariel is actually the work of the Holy Spirit who is in charge with the enlightenment and sanctification. In *The Tempest*, it is Ariel who makes those sinners to know they are guilty through his supernatural power. In fact, Prospero, Ferdinand and Ariel perform as the executors in the redemption process just like that of the "Trinity" in the *Bible*.

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## CONCLUSION

The influence of Christian culture upon Shakespeare's works is quite noticeable. The British scholar Burgers points out: "He draws so much water from the well of the *Bible*; we can say there will be no Shakespeare's

works without the *Bible*." It is believed that without the Christian culture it would be impossible for the tree of Shakespeare's works to grow healthily and prosperously. *The Tempest*, which is the masterpiece of his legendary plays, is permeated with Christian concepts. Besides, he exposes the dark side of society by regarding the "Trinity": Prospero, Ferdinand and Ariel as media. Finally, the redemption plan is completed through Prospero, Ferdinand and Ariel. So it is safe to draw a conclusion that the "Trinity" is the prototype both in the portraying of characters and in the setting of plots in *The Tempest*. Actually, the "Trinity" prototype exists in the play objectively and it is an indispensable ingredient. Through shaping the characters according to the "Trinity", the author depicts a history about human beings' sin, repentance and salvation. It expresses the care of human soul and the concern of human life of the author.

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