 Gonzalo’s golden age

Shakespeare imaginatively presents the optimistic idea that individuals can develop into better people by undergoing significant experiences, although mostly involving suffering. This is the Christian view of regeneration: the notion that suffering purges the individual of sin and guilt strengthens the character and allows growth towards personal potential.

Through the representation of Gonzalo and hybridity of generic conventions, tragi-comedy-romance, whereby Prospero's revenge plot is abandoned for the promise of romance between his daughter Miranda and Ferdinand, and farcically comic interactions of Stephano and Trinculo, it is clear that Shakespeare in the end holds out hope for the individuals, and thus as a humanist, he also expresses hope for society at large.

The individuals on the island represent a cross-section of society. When they atone for their sins, they not only grow personally but they also return to their civilized lives to advance the society that produced them. Perhaps Shakespeare sees the end result of this process of social evolution as the “ideal commonwealth”, the Utopian world described so imaginatively by Gonzalo.

Read Gonzalo’s passages in Act 2 scene I:

“I’ th’ Commonwealth I would by contraries … T’ excel the Golden Age”

Complete Questions 1 & 2, and then annotate Gonzalo’s dialogue as a class. Use the ‘comment’ function if in Word, or arrows and underlines by hand.

1. What kind of vision does Gonzalo entertain in Act II scene I?

1. Describe Gonzalo’s vision and its key aspects. What would his ‘society’ be like to live in? How is Shakespeare’s context relevant?

Gonzalo’s Vision: Act 2 Scene I

And were the king on ’t, what would I do? […]

I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries

Execute all things. For no kind of traffic

Would I admit. No name of magistrate.

Letters should not be known. Riches, poverty,

And use of service—none. Contract, succession,

Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard—none.

No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil.

No occupation. All men idle, all.

And women too, but innocent and pure.

No sovereignty— […]

All things in common nature should produce

Without sweat or endeavour. Treason, felony,

Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,

Would I not have. But nature should bring forth

Of its own kind all foison, all abundance,

To feed my innocent people. […]

I would with such perfection govern, sir,

T' excel the Golden Age.

1. Which other characters represent the Christian notion of regeneration: the notion that suffering purges the individual of sin and guilt strengthens the character and allows growth towards personal potential

| Name of character | Example from The Tempest |
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1. How do textual conversations in the form of identification of allusions assist us to make meaning?