

# International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies

ISSN: 2308-5460



## Monarchy versus Liberal Democracy: A Study of Defense Mechanism in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Lenny Abrahamson's *Room*

[PP: 209-216]

**Ma'soomeh Sehat**

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Yazd University  
Iran

**Hossein Jahantigh**

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Yazd University  
Iran

### ABSTRACT

This paper, by employing comparative study, seeks to highlight the adoption of defense mechanism by analyzing the possible similarities and differences in the behaviors, and the strategies of the characters and the respective impact of the political contexts of *The Tempest*, the last play written by Shakespeare and *Room*, the movie nominated for the best picture academy award of 2015. It begins with a discussion about displacement as the most dominant form of defense mechanism employed by the protagonists of the two selected works belonging to different eras, cultures and genres. Both protagonists displace their oppressive puissant onto their children. In *The Tempest*, Prospero displaces his brother by his daughter, while in *Room*; Joy's son displaces her rapist captor. The discussion then turns to the fact that although Prospero and Joy show almost the same behavior, only Joy, *Room*'s protagonist, is condemned. *The Tempest* is written in a patriarchal society governed by a monarch, while *Room*'s happenings are depicted in a liberal society. The deep correlation between political atmosphere and individuals' behavior pushes the study to examine the reasons for the resultant contrast between the two selected texts by focusing on the political context in the production of each. Monarchy needs obedient subjects whereas democracy is meant to respect individuals. Consequently, people, in these societies, think and behave differently. The findings of the research show how political orders result in disorders in the behavior of characters, e.g. patriarchal orders are not only justified by Monarchy's nature but are also produced by it, while democracy, as shown in the modern setting of *Room*, harshly condemns violation of individualism and pushes Joy, the protagonist, to a suicide attempt.

**Keywords:** *Defense Mechanism, Displacement, Monarchy, Liberal Democracy, Room, The Tempest*

ARTICLE INFO	The paper received on	Reviewed on	Accepted after revisions on
	20/04/2018	12/05/2018	10/07/2018

### Suggested citation:

Sehat, M. & Jahantigh, H. (2018). Monarchy versus Liberal Democracy: A Study of Defense Mechanism in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Lenny Abrahamson's *Room*. *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*. 6(2). 209-216.

### 1. Introduction

When a person encounters a cruel power impossible to be stopped, his ego might choose a weak person at whom he erupts his anger. Family members are always the most immediate choices for this displacement, especially children, who are heavily dependent on their parents. This fact is what happens in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare and *Room* by Abrahamson.

On the one hand, having been overthrown, Prospero, the Duke of Milan, is driven into exile with his daughter, Miranda. He is sent to a perilous journey through the sea, ending in an isolated island. There, he learns how to manipulate natural elements, with the help of which, twelve years later, he makes a superficial tempest to bring the crown prince, Ferdinand, to the island,

whose marriage to Miranda paves the way for Prospero to restore to his dukedom.

On the other hand, *Room* tells the story of Joy. She has been living in a room locked by her rapist captor for seven years. During this time, she has given birth to Jack who is now five. The only thing that links them to the outside world is a TV. However, Joy makes her son believe their room is located in the middle of space. The day after Jack's 5<sup>th</sup> birthday is different; Ma tells him the reality. Then, he is abused for her escaping plan. Outside her prison, when accosted about the possibility of sending Jack out sooner, Joy feels guilty and tries to commit suicide.

The present study tries to zoom in on cases of parallelism and disparity between these two stories by analyzing the seemingly



political orders in the two depicted societies and the actual disorder they inject both in the minds and lives of their protagonists.

The parallelism between these two stories is quite apparent; both children are victims of their parents' displacement. However, it is only Jack's mother, Joy, who is condemned. This paper seeks the reason for this contrast through studying the different political atmospheres the protagonists live in.

In this regard, after elaborating on the similarities in detail, England Renaissance monarchy is compared to modern US liberal democracy. Both these types of governing system have their own philosophical backgrounds, which lead their people to think and behave in particular ways. Therefore, Prospero, as a Renaissance man, is free to treat his daughter as he likes, but Joy, who lives in American liberal society, is doomed to face a severe condemnation.

The researchers do not pursue a simple application of political approach to the texts; they desire to offer a platform for investigating more about the impact of political systems on family relationships. The results of this paper can be conducive to cultural studies and psychosocial readings since it tries to introduce a new view about the interrelation between the type of political state and the way individuals behave.

## 2. Literature Review

As one of the most widely acclaimed authors, Shakespeare, and his works have been subjected to many studies over the years. Moreover, a good amount of literature, relevant to the primary concerns of this paper, does exist. Karen Newman (1986) has worked on Shakespeare's depicted families, centralizing the woman's situation "as a third term in her husband and father relationship" (p.86). In her study, Newman has illuminated on the fact that the depicted female characters in Shakespeare's works such as Desdemona of *Othello* and Miranda of *The Tempest* are treated like objects in their families. Their fathers and husbands consider them as valuable objects to reach their own targets. This is in line with our concern in this paper, especially the part zooming on *The Tempest*. We take Newman's discussion on father-daughter relationship as a starting point for our analysis of the mother-son relationship in the second text which is lacking in sources.

Stephan David Collins (2016) has also interpreted Renaissance ideas toward family relationships by reading Shakespeare's plays.

Collins analyzes different family relationships based on the moral standard of both church and state of Renaissance time. He continues his discussion by comparing the divergent reactions of contemporary and modern audiences of these plays; people with dissimilar political and social backgrounds. Family relationship is of prime importance to this study but the contribution here is that it tries to read *Room* in the same way. Besides, Collins' analysis of the reactions of readers in different eras is of help to this paper's main objective, analysis of two texts far removed in time and place.

Katie Halsey and Angus Vine have found Shakespeare interesting from a different viewpoint. Their 2018 book entitled *Shakespeare and Authority* offers a collection of essays on the concept of authority influenced both by Shakespeare and by his world. Providing their readers with different aspects of authority before, during, and after Shakespeare's time, they have compiled various essays, including several comparative studies, showing the effect of Shakespeare on British and Irish romantic culture. What is of interest to this study in their reading is that *The Tempest* has been employed as one part of many comparative studies, as well.

Adding to all that, David Lowenthal in his *Shakespeare's Thought* (2017) has offered divergent critics' interpretations of Shakespeare's seven famous plays, including *The Tempest*. Having had scrutinized Shakespeare's poetic genius, Lowenthal has tried to express his attitude toward different political and moralistic issues.

While a plethora of literature is available on *The Tempest* and its author, the other side of this comparative study, the movie *Room*, has not received equal attention. Ryan Botha has read this movie with the lens of psychology in 2016. In his paper published in *New Voices in Psychology*, Botha has analyzed the ways Joy makes the situation tolerable for her son with the help of imagination, e.g. Jack is accustomed to personify objects. Neil Smith (2016) in her review of the movie has focused on Joy and her son relationship and T Ue (2012) has allocated a significant part of his interview with Emmy Donoghue, the author of the novel *Room* (2010) from which the movie is adapted, to this issue. Comparing Jack's happiness inside and outside of "room" is the matter of interest for both of them and of significance for this study in interpreting the mom's suicide

attempt as something wrong, something inflicted by the political system which has a wrong appreciation of true happiness.

To sum, it is evident from these pieces of literature that there is no study available on this paper's topic. The comparative study of the parent-child relationship and the impact of the respective political state on the characters in a Renaissance text, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and a modern movie, *Room*, is what this paper seeks to conduct. To this end, the following questions are to be raised: What is the relation between the political state and its possible impact on the characters' actions? Do the parallelisms found in the selected works suffice for our discussion of works belonging to different eras? Is displacement formed at an individual or a group level and, for that matter, how is the ending of each work justified?

These are some of the questions we want to consider, eyeing on the sociopolitical circumstances in the formation of characters personalities and their stance in the time of problem in the Renaissance and Modern societies depicted in the works of Shakespeare and Abrahamson, respectively. The primary focus of both writers is to depict parent-child relationship at very critical moments in their lives when parents' decision-making is not only affecting themselves as individuals but their poor puppet-like children. Therefore, the following discussions wish to zoom both on the parallelisms and the disparities in the two selected works to show how people are victims of their socio-political circumstances, which affect lives at both individual and collective levels but with different conclusions for each work due to the ontological perspectives of each era. The findings of this study will be helpful for further research on cultural and sociopolitical aspects of the selected texts.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

Freud has introduced different kinds of defense mechanism, which an ego might seek to alleviate the pressure it has experienced. Later on, his daughter, Anna (1937) in her book entitled *The Ego and Mechanisms of Defense* has discussed this issue more and has classified different ways it might be activated. Displacement is one of these ways which this paper will focus on. The first part analyzes the similarity between *The Tempest's* and *Room's* protagonists' behavior toward their children.

The second part will draw on the political approach to explain the disparity

between these two stories' endings. As literature is often a reflection of the political atmosphere of its era, political approaches can be applied to study it. Keith Brooker (2003) believes "during last few decades, literary studies have come to be dominated by [political] approaches" which emphasizes "close connection between literature and politics throughout Western history" (p. ix). Different political times might make authors tell their stories differently or give them different endings. In this regard, by studying different eras of the Jacobean age of Britain (setting of *The Tempest*) and liberal democracy of the modern US (setting of *Room*) and their possible impact on their societies, this paper tries to justify the contrast in endings of the two selected works.

## **4. Data Analysis and Results**

### **4.1. Parallelism: Displacement**

Having been subjugated, as Freud states, one's ego may find shelter in defense mechanism i.e. his oppressing anxiety erupts but into a new form. Displacement is one of the main forms of defense mechanism, which means replacing an impulse onto a powerless target (Mischel, 1981, p. 40).

The way the protagonists of *The Tempest* and *Room* treat their children can be considered a good example of displacement. Prospero unconsciously found his daughter a suitable choice to solve his despair. She added meaning to his life as it is clear in his own words:

Thou wast that did preserve me.  
Thou didst smile  
Infused with a fortitude from  
heaven,  
When I have deck'd the sea with  
drops full salt. (Shakespeare, trans.  
2014, 1.2.264-66)

Having been overpowered by his brother, Prospero needs Miranda to overcome this situation. In order to do it, he substituted his brother with her. Psychologically speaking, his behavior toward Miranda is a good example of displacement.

Likewise, *Room's* protagonist, Joy, looks at her son as a means of escape. She had been captivated for two years when she delivered Jack. It means the only one she could see, up to then, was her rapist. Therefore, Jack's birth meant a lot to her; as Jack, while recalling his ma's words at the beginning of the movie, mentions he was her chance of life as if Jack "zoomed down from heaven through skylight [for her]" (Guiney, E. and D. Gross, 2015, 0:01:53).



#### 4.1.1. Protagonists' keeping their children with themselves

When Prospero was forced into exile, Miranda was only three years old. Nobody would harm such a small child. Additionally, as a just duke, finding a trustworthy person to take care of her was not definitely impossible for him. Surprisingly, he did not even think about this possibility. He jeopardized Miranda's life and made her expect an indefinite future just because she was the one who "preserved" him.

Jack's story is almost the same. His mother never thought about rescuing him. The trick she perpetrated to send him out at age five, albeit, could have been planned much sooner even immediately after his birth. This is the bitter fact she has to encounter after being rescued from the room:

**Interviewer:** When he was born, did it... did it ever occur to you to ask your captor to take Jack away?

**Joy:** Away?

**Interviewer:** Well, to take him to a hospital, say, leave him there, where he could be found?

**Joy:** Why... why would I do that?

**Interviewer:** So Jack could be free. Now, this is the ultimate sacrifice... and I understand that... but did you think about him having a normal childhood? (Guiney, E. and D. Gross, 2015, 1:30:49)

The interviewer questions her hesitation in sending Jack out of the room sooner, which is shocking to her. Like Prospero, she never thinks about such a possibility at all.

#### 4.1.2. Protagonists' giving limited information to their children

In these two stories as long as suppression is going on, displacement continues. Both children are allowed to learn nothing unless after passing their parents' filter. Lack of knowledge about the real world makes living in an isolated place far easier. Miranda fantasizes about her life after leaving the isolated island in which she is going to live as a queen happily ever after and Jack begins thinking about different ways to get out of their remoteness right after acceptance of this reality. To evade bothering their children, the protagonists ought to keep their children away from at least part of reality.

#### 4.1.3. Teaching their children the best

Both protagonists look as though they do their best in nurturing their children and

their children are obedient beyond imagining. Besides, they are much more knowledgeable than other children at the same age. Prospero, as cited earlier, addresses Miranda:

Thou wast that did preserve me. Thou didst smile.

Infused with a fortitude from heaven,  
When I have deck'd the sea with drops  
full salt. (Shakespeare, trans. 2014,  
1.2.264-66)

Besides, Miranda is much more educated than not only the typical Renaissance girl but the aristocratic one also. At the beginning of the play, she is the only one who understands the tempest is an artificial one and at the end, we see she knows how to play chess, which confirms Prospero's assertion.

Similarly, in the case of Jack, mom's resolution in tutoring her son in the best possible way is noticeable, as the critic Neil Smith mentions:

Thanks to Ma's unwavering efforts, he is a bright, energetic, healthy bundle of happiness, well-versed in at least some literature—he knows who Jack the Giant Killer is as well as Samson, a hero he relates to since his own hair hangs beyond his shoulders.

Jack's knowledge of literature is seen in his allusive language. Additionally, he knows how to read, write and do basic math which is normally too much for a child at age five.

#### 4.1.4. Not giving their children the information about the real world

When it comes to knowing about the real world, both Jack and Miranda face a barricade. Jack simply thinks they are living in "outer space" (Guiney, E. and D. Gross, 2015, 0:26:52). He is told that whatever shown on TV is fantasy and unreal. Additionally, he is not allowed to know Old Nick is his father; the fact every child has the right to know. Miranda, meanwhile, addresses her father like this:

You have often  
Begun to tell me what I am, but stopp'd  
And left me in bootless inquisition  
Concluding "stay: not yet."  
(Shakespeare, trans. 2014, 1.2.124-127)

"Often" alludes to the fact that she has repeatedly inquired to know about the real world, and has been repeatedly denied by her father. Additionally, at the point Miranda wants to know whether the tempest is real or unreal, instead, Prospero gives some ambiguous answer and forces her to

sleep. Even such a small piece of information might be harmful.

#### 4.1.5. Protagonists' Escaping with their children

As a final resort, Prospero and Joy use their children to go back to the real world. For Joy, "her son is essential to her plan" (Wilson, 2015). First, Joy heartlessly burns him to pretend he is running a high fever to no avail. The next trick is rolling him in a rug as if he is dead and sending him to an unknown world without any protection. Jack manages to follow his mom's dicta. It is, however, so risky a plan for him that he might even lose his life.

Prospero, on the other hand, is dreaming to take his dukedom back all through his life on the island. Miranda is his chosen device to make this dream come true. Consequently, he is always worried about her losing her virginity since, technically, without it, she cannot be useful anymore.

Furthermore, if she gets married to a prince, they can go back home safe and sound. Therefore, natural elements are manipulated into producing an artificial tempest to bring Ferdinand to the island and supernatural elements are employed to make him fall in love. In the meantime, Miranda and her future are negligible. Prospero knows nothing about Ferdinand while planning his marriage to Miranda. These issues are not matters of importance, as long as Ferdinand's position, a king's son, serves and satisfies Prospero's wishes to escape.

Patricia Khan (1991) believes that Prospero, after seeing Miranda and Ferdinand's happiness in having each other, discloses this desire explicitly (p. 94). He shows this while declaring:

So glad of this as they I cannot be,  
Who are surprised withal, but my rejoicing  
At nothing can be more. (Shakespeare,  
trans. 2014, 3.1.1389-91)

He is even much happier than them since he has dreamt this moment which will promise him to reinstate his dukedom and power.

#### 4.2. Disparity

Although at first glance, the parent-child relationship in these two stories looks almost the same, their nearly opposite conclusions set them apart completely. Shakespeare, as a Renaissance author, does not blame his protagonists' treatment of his child, while in *Room*, set in the modern US, Joy has to experience an impossible situation resulting in a suicide attempt.

##### 4.2.1. The concluding parts

As discussed, the protagonists depicted in *The Tempest* and *Room*, seek shelter in their children to alleviate and later on escape from their forced isolation. Although they both abuse their children in the same way, Abrahamson's conclusion makes his story completely different. Joy is utterly criticized which leads her to commit suicide while Prospero is enjoying a happy ending.

##### 4.2.2. The political atmosphere

The difference in the concluding parts of the two selected works owes a lot to their political states. The setting of *The Tempest* is British Jacobean age and is meant to attract Renaissance men while *Room* is set in the US addressing the 21<sup>st</sup>-century audience. The political contexts are in stark contrast; monarchy versus liberal democracy. The former one is constructed based on the patriarchal hierarchy while the latter one introduces itself as a defender of freedom and equality. This difference of ideas shows itself not only in social issues but also in people's attitudes and lifestyles.

##### 4.2.2.1. The impact of political power on individuals

The footprint of state power in an individual's beliefs and values is noticeable. In this respect, one's decision can be studied as a reflection of the governing system of his society. For instance, monarchy normally espouses the patriarchal society in which the superiority of some group over others is a fixed convention, accepted by all its members unanimously.

Although Shakespeare, the author of "not an age but for all time" in Ben Jonson's words (as cited in Matus, 2013, p. 210), portrays characters dealing with universal issues, his works, especially his plays, are still body of his time. The hegemony of monarchy can be traced in each and every one of his characters' behavior, a good example of which is *The Tempest's* Prospero (Wells, 2009, p. 15). Shakespeare enjoys the patronage of King James I and writes his last plays including *The Tempest* in return. In these plays, called romances by many critics, he tries his best to mystify the royal family and the king himself. Furthermore, Shakespeare's aim, as an author in King's Men, is the elevation of political issues rather than just writing a piece of escape literature. He tries to justify the Jacobean world's political matters in it (Bergeron, 2006, p. 197).

Shakespeare's protagonist could also be linked with England royal father. Prospero is a just leader on the island. He



tries to civilize Caliban through his language and as a father, he is an ideal Renaissance man. For Wickham by “investigation of family bonds and political role,” Shakespeare desires to confirm the rule of King James I (as cited in Henderson, 2006, p. 217).

Moreover, the governors’ beliefs may influence the whole society. The acceptance of monarchy popularizes the Machiavellian theory in England of Renaissance age, and consequently, the entrance of colonial discourse. As colonizers, Renaissance English men do believe that civilization and pious religion require them to be widely spread. The natives, from this viewpoint, are not sophisticated enough to understand such issues, what Prospero’ behavior is a good example of. All people living on his island are overwhelmed by his hegemony. Despite bearing the desire for freedom at almost every moment in their minds, Ariel and Caliban never think of putting it into action. They both need someone else to be free: the former Prospero himself, and the latter Trinculo and Stephano. In contrast to Caliban and Ariel, Miranda is so obedient that she never thinks about freedom.

It is almost impossible to prove whether Machiavelli directly influences Shakespeare or not; however, nobody can ignore the essence of Machiavelli’s ideas in his works; some of these ideas are the foundation of the moral convention of his age (Roe, 2002). Eric Heinze in his (2018) article on authority and politics in Shakespearean drama asserts “Machiavels everywhere, yet not prop to think,” i.e. the impact of Machiavellianism can be traced in “divergent characters and themes” depicted by Shakespeare (136). In another study on the same issue, David M. Bergeron (2006) declares; “Prospero uses his royal daughter to recover control of Milan and to gain a measure of control of Naples through her marriage to Ferdinand” (p. 217). Prospero does not feel guilty and nobody blames him, because based on the Machiavellian theory that the end justifies the means, such behavior is acceptable.

Joy, however, lives in a starkly different atmosphere. She lives in the US of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in which liberal democracy pervades. Liberalism is manifested in almost all aspects of American life. Not only the political thoughts but also social, cultural and even personal issues are affected by its hegemony (Volander, 2007, p. 478). American liberal tradition says

individualism should be centralized, around which different aspects of life can be defined. In other words, each person has a set of fixed rights, upheld by social conventions and state policies, hard to be changed. Thus, a happy and a normal child has a set definition in this society; “Jack should be in grade school — making fun of teachers, getting into trouble, experiencing his first crush” (Wilson, 2015). Joy ruins his right of having the so-called normal life. Therefore, based on the standards of American life, no choice is left to her but to be condemned.

Privileging individualism undermines the human relationships. Jack is delighted in living with his mom in spite of being captivated in the room. It is true that Joy keeps him to give meaning to her own life, nevertheless, the privations of the room’s life do not stop her to provide Jack with a normal happy life. Joy tries her best and allocates all her energy and time to keep Jack happy and normal. Under the influence of liberalism hegemony, however, she has no choice but to commit suicide. She might have decided differently if her story would have been set in another political context. Donoghue, the author of the novel, *Room*, “provocatively asks if such an upbringing might even be preferable to the over-stimulated, expectation-burdened childhood that is generally considered ‘normal’” (Smith, 2016). As Smith mentions, Jack is an absolute normal child and accordingly his mother does not deserve suicide. Maybe, in line with Smith’s comment, when Joy calls herself “not a good enough ma,” Jack rejects her idea simply: “but you are” (Guiney, E. and D. Gross, 2015, 1:46:20). It seems Abrahamson, also, wants his audience to think twice.

#### 4.2.2.2. The impact of political power on families

A popular doctrine many Renaissance minds were haunted by is Humanism. It highlights the effect of human’s nature and is originated from Greek philosophy and the theory of cosmology. It says a set of identical laws operate throughout universe, bodies, families, estates, and cosmos itself. In all of these organisms, a paradigm of power is taken into account called the chain of being. When it comes to society, the king is considered God’s deputy on the earth with his lovely subjects who have to be obedient in reverse (Wells, 2009, p. 11). This theory, when applied to families, replaces the king with the father whose wife and children are

his subjects. Consequently, he has the right to do whatever a king does.

This Renaissance conventional hierarchy is not acceptable in modern American society, since, in the liberal democracy, no individual is worth more than any other one (Hughes, 2011, p. 65). Moreover, the definition of family is different for this country. The family is respected in such a society as a social institution vital to guarantee individuals' mental and physical health.

John Stuart Mill (1859), one of the most influential thinkers of liberalism, argues for the intervention of parent-child relationships in a chapter of his book *On Liberty* entitled "Applications." He declares: "To bring a child into existence without a fair prospect of being able, not only to provide food for its body but instruction and training for its mind, is a moral crime, both against the unfortunate offspring and against society" (p. 97). According to Mill, the parents who do not manage to carry out their duty to their child should be considered criminals. Thinking about such moral crime pushes Joy to suicide, what Prospero as a Renaissance father would never face. The political waves of the depicted societies make the selected two protagonists think, and accordingly, behave, differently.

### 5. Conclusion

This paper was written to conduct a comparative study between *The Tempest* by Shakespeare and *Room* by Lenny Abrahamson through the political approach. It has been shown that despite all the similarities in parent-child relationship of these two stories, the type of government and accordingly its hegemony make authors adopt different conclusions.

*The Tempest* is written in a patriarchal society governed by a monarch. In such a society, a father is the king of his family whose superiority is accepted by other members. Prospero is a man raised in this atmosphere; he never feels guilty about misbehaving his daughter. Joy, meanwhile, prefers to put an end to her life after getting aware of her misbehavior. In comparison to patriarchy, parents living in a country with liberal democracy have defined duties; failing to fulfill these duties makes them criminals. Monarchy glorifies hierarchy with the king as the head while democracy believes in individualism. The clash of these two ideas lends credence to the opposition of the selected works in their concluding parts.

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