“O brave new world that has such people in’t” (V. i. 1241), Miranda exclaims in the final act of Shakespeare’s The Tempest. “Tis new to thee” (V. i. 1241), her father, Prospero replies, and, indeed, the presence of civilized men on the island is new to Miranda. However, the world in which the setting of The Tempest exists is one of unreality in which nature and art collide to create an environment of mystery. An island described as “uninhabitable,” “desolate,” “inaccessible,” “lush,” and “green,” it is an island of shifting time, space, and vegetation. The Tempest is a play of indefinite setting, and for that reason lends itself to uncommon transportability (Vaughn 73). The poet John Keats once described the work of Shakespeare as having great “negative capability,” meaning his work has “the ability to remain in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Leher 197). The Tempest, more than any other of Shakespeare’s plays, possesses this quality, and for this reason lends itself to nearly unlimited interpretation. This paper will examine the ecological aspects of The Tempest and present an ecocritical interpretation of nature and man’s role and use of natural resources on the island.

The mysterious and supernatural nature of the island is reinforced by the “subtleties o’ the isle” (Sherwood 67), these subtleties being Prospero’s magic, nature, and the environmental conditions of the island. Much of what we learn about the ecological aspects of the island are from descriptions by the characters: “this most desolate isle” (Ariel, III. ii. 80), “this bare island” (Prospero, Epilogue, 8), and “this fearful country” (Gonzalo, V. i. 106). In his essay The Environment in The Tempest, L.T. Fitz writes that “one’s view of the island really depends on whether one is disposed towards optimism or pessimism” (44). Fitz references a scene in act II, which provides an example of the contrasting views of the island among the characters:

Adrian (to Gonzalo). Though this island seem to be desert –
     Uninhabitable, and almost inaccessible –
It must needs be of subtle, tender, and delicate temperance…

The air breathes upon us here most sweetly.

Gonzalo. Here is everything advantageous to life.
Sebastian. Of that there’s none, or little.
Gonzalo (to Adrian). How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green!
Antonio. The ground indeed is tawny.
Sebastian. With an eye of green in’t.
Antonio. He misses not much.
Sebastian. No, he doth but mistake the truth totally.

(II. i. 1129)

It is unclear if the language the characters use to describe the island (at least as they perceive it), is actually the reality (if there is any reality) of the island’s ecological environment. From the above passage, all we learn is that the grass is either green or the ground is “tawny.” Fitz points out that the masque goddesses do refer to the island as “this grassplot,” “this short-grass’d green,” and “this green land” (44). But it is a large island, and we do learn of other ecological aspects of the island which indicate that there is more to the island than grass or barren ground. Fitz cites that there are seasonal changes and time measured in winters (I. ii. 298), there are yellow sands (I. ii. 376), there are rocks and caves, one of which Caliban lives in (I. ii. 342 – 43), there are streams and ponds (I. ii. 39), and there is even a polluted lake of horse-urine, to which Ariel leads the drunkards Trinculo and Stefano to dance in up to their chins (IV. i. 182). There is also plant and animal life on the island. Caliban gathers firewood (II. ii. 1, 184) and catches fish (II. ii. 184). Through Shakespeare’s imagery of “concrete details” about the ecology of the island we get a sense of life on the island and a “closeness to real earth” (Clemen 189). These indications of life on the island provide us with an understanding that there is an interaction between man and nature on the island; and it is an interaction in which concrete language basis aspects of reality in an environment in which supernatural events occur.

In reading The Tempest as a supernatural play, we cannot help but become aware of man and man’s fate on the island. Nature itself is part of this action. And as Wolfgang Clemen writes in his book The Development of Shakespeare’s Imagery, the natural scenes of action have a deeper meaning and that “the enchanted island which becomes vivid through such a wealth of single features and of concrete touches is more than merely a well-chosen locality” (182). The natural scenes in The Tempest represent an environment which acts upon men as they act upon it. Prospero is the one, after all, who is the enchanter of the island and conjures up the storm which sets all subsequent events in action, events in which Prospero, by supernatural means, controls nature. As Clemen notes, “this not only applies to the storm itself...but it also holds good of the majority of the plants and animals mentioned. For these are mostly brought into relation with physical pain, threats of punishment, trouble and distress” (189). Prospero’s curse upon Caliban comes immediately to mind as an example of nature used as a threat to cause physical pain:

For this, be sure, to-night thou shalt have cramps,
Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up; urchins
Shall, for that vast night that they may work,  
All exercise on thee; thou shalt be pinched  
As thick as honey comb, each pinch more stinging  
Than bees that made em. (I.ii. 324) (Emphasis mine.)

Clemen writes that with these curses and threats we are made to feel that the island is “haunted.” Also, we get the sense that the inhabitants of the island are under an invisible spell (cast by Prospero) and maybe subject to “continual harassing pains and troubles” (191). We know that Prospero has this ability from Miranda's first words after the tempest: “If by your art,” she states, “my dearest father, you have put the wild waters in this roar, allay them” (I. ii. 1). Miranda's plea to her father to “allay,” to calm the elements of the storm are telling, and reveal to us Prospero’s ability to control nature on the island. Prospero’s power is exercised through the conjuring of the tempest, and we see man’s interaction with nature as a “hostile force which threatens man’s existence” (Clemen, 185). Nature is thus used as a weapon.

Prospero’s magic, his knowledge obtained through his books and study, allows him to control nature for ill or good. His knowledge is his only means of control over the nature and the inhabitants of the island. As Caliban sees it, Prospero's books are the means which separate them: “First to possess his books,” Caliban says to Stefano and Trinculo as they plot to murder Prospero and take over the island, “for without them he’s but a sot as I am, nor hath not one spirit to command – they all do hate him as rootedly as I. Burn but his books” (III. ii. 94). Caliban is not ignorant. He knows that the island and its natural resources belong to his master, but he sees Prospero's power and control as a “disease,” he states: “All the infections the sun sucks up from bogs, fans, flats, on Prospero fall, and make him by inch-meal a disease” (II. ii. 1). Caliban is oppressed by Prospero, and possesses knowledge of the island’s resources which Prospero is aware of: “We cannot miss him,” he says to Miranda, “he does make our fire, fetch in our wood, and serves in offices that profit us” (I. ii. 314). Caliban is the rough nature of the island, possessing knowledge of the island’s natural resources and harboring those resources for Prospero’s benefit. Perhaps, the most interesting thing about the relationship between Prospero and Caliban is the struggle for power over the island’s resources.

In many ways, there are two islands which are portrayed through the imagery and language Shakespeare uses. One is Prospero’s island, an island of enchantment and control through supernatural means. And the other is Caliban’s island, an island of rough nature and natural resources. After all, Caliban is indigenous to the island, and Prospero is something of an imperialist. Caliban even states his claim to the island and recalls showing Prospero the resources of the island and Prospero's initial care of him upon arriving on the island:

This island’s mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak’st from. When thou cam’st first,  
Thou strok’st me and made much of me, wouldst give me  
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how  
To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
That burn by day and night; and then I loved thee,  
And showed thee all the qualities o’th’ isle,  
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile –  
(I.ii. 332-40) (Emphasis mine.)

However, Caliban has profited nothing from teaching Prospero of the island’s qualities and resources. In fact, he has been oppressed by Prospero’s knowledge and made his slave. Caliban states: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t is I know how to curse” (I. ii. 365). It is easy to view Caliban as a victim and a symbol of “a struggle for liberation and cultural authenticity...against the hegemonic, Eurocentric vision of the universe” (Vaughan 107), but Caliban understands the power of nature and through his language in describing the scenery of the island and Prospero’s control of nature against him, Caliban “develops the theme of nature’s hostility against traitorous mankind” (Clemen 191).

Prospero has used his magic in a treacherous way against the island and its inhabitants. Under Prospero’s power the island has become a physically harsh and dangerous environment, which leads us to contrast the “lush” and “green” descriptions of the island against the darker elements of the play. There is a sense of ambiguity in the language Prospero uses of which Fitz writes:

The contrast between the sterility of the island and the fertility in the masque is one more manifestation of the central ambiguity of the play: the ambiguity that allows “calm seas, auspicious gales” and “this thing of darkness I/ Acknowledge mine” to be spoken within a few lines of each other (47).

“This thing of darkness I/Acknowledge mine” (V. i. 278) are the ambiguous lines which Prospero speaks of Caliban as his plot to kill his master is revealed. But they are lines which reveal something deeper about Prospero human nature and his view of what he has created on the island – a reality of unreality – an island whose ecology has been detrimentally damaged by supernatural means. Prospero has created an island of darkness.

The “negative capability” we find in The Tempest allows us to read the play in context to our current era and reflect upon our own interactions with nature. In many ways, contextualizations of The Tempest as a play about colonization and imperialism are beneficiary to our reading of the play with an ecocritical view. In his essay The Ecocritical Insurgency, Lawrence Buell writes that one of the aims of ecocriticism is to provide a “consideration of technologies of virtual ecology and of fictions that erase distinction between physical world and simulacrum (likeness) as sites of reflection on human perception, negotiation, and manipulation of physical environment” (702). With reading The Tempest in this regard, we
begin to see parallels between our own interactions with nature and nature's interaction with us. As Prospero has used his power to control the island for his benefit, we have used our power to control elements of nature for ours, but at what cost? We live in an age of global warming of which we are beginning to see the effects of. Environmental issues related to industrialization, deforestation, oil-drilling, and pollution have all led to drastic changes in our environment. However, it does little to say that Shakespeare would not have been aware of these issues in writing The Tempest, but it does say something about our over indulgence for control over our natural resources; just as Prospero acknowledge his own “thing of darkness,” we must acknowledge ours.

In acknowledging his effects upon the island, Prospero decides to return to Milan. Prospero, in fact, abhors the environment his magic has created on the island. He states:

The pine and cedar; graves at my command
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let em forth
By my so potant art. But this rough magic
I here abjure. And when I have required
Some heavenly music – which even now I do –
To work mine end upon their sense that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staf,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book. (V. i. 33-57)

Prospero seeks to leave the island without his magic, in its natural state, without the threat of hostility to nature which the books (his knowledge and means of control) represent. Prospero will give up his control; he will “drown his books.” Furthermore, Prospero ask for forgiveness for his actions upon the island:

Now I want spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so, that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (Epilogue. 15-20)

Ultimately, it is unclear what will be the lasting ecological effects of Prospero's enchantments upon the island, but it is clear that he feels he has caused harm, and to free the island of his curses and control he leaves. Caliban on the other hand stays behind on the island, presumably to reclaim what was rightfully his, however, we do not know in what ways ecologically the island will change.

The interactions between man and nature are a delicate and intricate balance. Just as we do not know fully the consequences of our actions upon the environment or how it will react in response, we do know that we need to leave something of nature behind, and allow the environment which we have damaged to heal. Prospero was aware of this, and we must be also. There is still time for us to drown our own books and allow our indulgences to set us free.

Works Cited