

Reading...

The Poetry of Inua Ellams

Introduction

Inua Ellams (b.1984, Nigeria) is a poet, playwright, and performer. He is perhaps best known for his critically acclaimed play *The Barber Shop Chronicles* (directed by Olivier award-winning director Bijan Sheibani). As well as receiving 5-star reviews, the play enjoyed two sell-out runs at the National Theatre and a world tour. Although Ellams' poetry has been published widely in pamphlets and reviews, the writer's debut collection, *The Actual*, was only published in 2020. Many of the poems from this collection can be found online.

***The Actual* (Penned in the Margins: London, 2020)**

Booker Prize-winning author Bernadine Evaristo has said of *The Actual*: 'this is what poetry looks like when you have nothing to lose, when you speak from the heart, when you have spent years honing your craft so that you can be free'. On the collection's striking black front cover, the title *The Actual* is embedded within four columns of text. All text, apart from the title, is redacted by golden bands: the word that has been redacted repeatedly is the word 'Fuck'. The colloquial phrase 'what the fuck' is a phrase uttered to convey a speaker's disbelief in what they are hearing or seeing. When inserted into this sentence the word 'actual' serves as an intensifier. It suggests an increased level of incredulity in the reality of the situation. In the 55 poems that constitute this collection the poet interrogates aspects of contemporary life that are truly difficult to comprehend. The title of each poem takes the form 'Fuck / _____'. The subjects of the poems range from political figures (Donald Trump, Mandela), pop cultural icons (Tupac, Biggie Smalls, Batman and the Joker), inanimate objects (concrete, drums) to abstract nouns (loneliness, love, history and humanity). Thematically, the poet uses these subjects to explore empire and its racist legacy, toxic masculinity and social injustices.

Reading...

'Fuck / Shakespeare' by Inua Ellams

In this poem Ellams considers William Shakespeare's depiction of race in two of his plays. The poet focuses on the eponymous figure Othello and on Caliban (from *The Tempest*) to reveal problematic aspects of their characterisation.

Before studying the poem, it is worth reading the character summaries below.

Othello – a character summary

Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* centres on the fate of the play's eponymous protagonist. Othello has risen to the position of general in the Venetian army and at the play's outset he is an integral member of Venice's civic society. Although he has won widespread respect for his leadership of the army and courage in battle, Othello is nevertheless viewed as an outsider in Venice. Othello is introduced to the play as a 'Moor', and this particular word is used nine times in the course of Act 1:1 alone. Shakespeare uses this term to determine the fact that Othello is religiously and ethnically not a white Christian man.

When Othello marries Desdemona (an upper-class white woman from Venice), the couple incur the wrath of her father, Brabantio. The fact that they have eloped to marry suggests that they fully understood the stigma that society would attach to their marriage. Nevertheless, the strength of Desdemona's and Othello's overwhelming love for each other fortifies them against much of the criticism.

When the play's antagonist, Iago, decides to act on his deep-rooted irrational hatred and jealousy of Othello, the protagonist's fate is sealed. Iago emotionally manipulates him into thinking that his beloved and faithful wife, Desdemona, is in love with another man. Jealousy and paranoia consume Othello and he takes the life of Desdemona. When the truth is finally revealed to him of his manipulation, Othello comprehends the horrific nature of his actions, and kills himself.



Portrait of Al-Annuri, 1600. Photograph:
The University Of Birmingham Research
and Cultural Collections

Caliban – a character summary

Caliban is a central and complex character in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He is the child of a witch-hag and is referred to by other characters as monstrous and dark. When the rightful Duke of Milan (called Prospero) has his power usurped by his brother and finds himself exiled, he lands up on Caliban's island. Prospero claims the island as his own to rule. Consequently, Caliban becomes his slave. Owing to his clear-eyed understanding that Prospero has stolen something that rightfully belongs to him Caliban has grown to detest his master. Whilst Ariel (another servant of Prospero) willingly complies with the former Duke's instructions, Caliban refuses to submit entirely to him. For this, Caliban can be described as a dignified and stoic character.

Yet, Shakespeare's complex characterisation of Caliban means that this character is also portrayed as bitter, savage (he states that he wants to impregnate Prospero's daughter, Miranda) and, ultimately, subservient. When he falls in with the drunkard Stefano, Caliban seems to idolise him. He has found yet another "master" in Stefano. Together with a third man Trinculo they plot to remove Prospero's magic power and then murder him. When this plot is foiled, Caliban admits that he has been 'a thrice-double ass [...] to take this drunkard for a god'. By the play's end he is back in service to Prospero. The ambiguous ending leaves the audience unclear of Caliban's fate.

Many readers have read the story of Caliban as an allegory for the people and cultures that were suppressed by colonisers.



Caliban, *The Tempest*. Photograph: Royal Shakespeare Company

Activity One

Read the poem 'Fuck / Shakespeare'. For each character mentioned (Othello and Caliban) summarise the main arguments the poet makes about them.

Character	Main Arguments
Othello	1.
	2.
	3.
Caliban	1.
	2.
	3.

Activity Two

Below is an extract from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. In the extract we hear the voices of Caliban and Prospero.

Find evidence here to **support one** of the **points** you made about Caliban in **Activity One**. Clearly **explain how** the evidence that you have selected proves your point.

Caliban. I must eat my dinner.
This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest 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 show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island.

Prospero. *Thou most lying slave,
Whom stripes may move, not kindness! I have used thee,
Filth as thou art, with human care, and lodged thee
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honour of my child.*

Caliban. O ho, O ho! would't had been done!
Thou didst prevent me; I had peopled else
This isle with Calibans

(Act 1:2, ll.527)

Extension

Now find **two** more pieces of evidence from the play to support your points for **Activity One**. You can find a free online version of the play here:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/tempest/full.html>

Activity Three

Below is an extract from Shakespeare's *Othello*. This extract sits at the heart of the play. In it we see Othello try to come to terms with his wife's apparent infidelity. He begins to question his own identity: he wonders if he might truly be as inarticulate and barbaric as others believe him to be.

Find evidence here to **support one** of the **points** you made about Othello in **Activity One**. Clearly **explain how** the evidence you have selected proves your point.

Haply for I am black,
And have not those soft parts of conversation
That chamberers have; or for I am declined
Into the vale of years – yet that's not much –
She's gone. I am abused, and my relief
Must be to loathe her. O curse of marriage,
That we can call these delicate creatures ours
And not their appetites! I had rather be a toad
And live upon the vapor of a dungeon
Than keep a corner in the thing I love
For others' uses. Yet 'tis the plague of great ones;
Prerogated are they less than the base.
'Tis destiny unshunnable, like death.

(Act 3:3, ll.267-279)

Extension

Now find **two** more pieces of **evidence** from the play to support your points for **Activity One**. You can find a free online version of the play here:

<http://shakespeare.mit.edu/othello/full.html>

Unpicking the Text

Re-read the poem and answer the questions below.

'Fuck / Shakespeare'

And another thing / the grace you brought Othello / how you
forged that Moor / got him talking down his eloquence as if his
tongue wasn't part swan feather / part molasses / how you wrote
a church of darkness steeped by Iago / and O! Thello its soul
beacon of honour and light / Bruh / that shit literary fire / race-
theory brimstone / middle-passage gold

but /

how you played Caliban / his tongue as Othello's / and just
as wronged / How you imbibed him with / emblemed him of
colonised peoples / got me all riled up / imagining my ancestor's
vengeance / a rough blade thrust through Prospero's proud heart
/ but you didn't / Play ends / Cali still enslaved / Bruh / that shit
fucked

(from *The Actual*, Inua Ellams)

Questions

1. Look at **line one**. Explain why the **first three words** are an effective way to open the poem. (2 marks)
2. What does the **word choice** of '**forged**' in **line two** suggest about the character of Othello? (2 marks)
3. Explain what the writer means by the phrase '**how you [...] got him talking down his eloquence**' (lines 1-2). (1 mark)
4. In **line three** the writer uses a metaphor to describe Othello's intelligent words (his 'eloquence'). Analyse the **imagery** used by the writer here and explain why it is effective. (4 marks)
5. Analyse the **image** '**How you wrote a church of darkness steeped by Iago**' and comment on its effect. (2 marks)
6. In **line five** the writer uses **colloquial language**. Quote an example of this and analyse fully, commenting on its effect. (2 marks)
7. To what is the writer referring when he says '**middle-passage gold**'? (1 mark)
8. Explain the **function** of the word '**but**' in **line seven**. (2 marks)

9. Look at **lines eight** and **nine**. Explain how the writer uses personification to convey Shakespeare's unjust treatment of Caliban. (2 marks)
10. Explain the meaning of the following words from the **third stanza**:
- **imbibed**
 - **emblemmed**
- (2 marks)
11. Read lines **ten and eleven**. How does the writer's **word choice** convey the speaker's anger about Caliban's situation? (4 marks)
12. Analyse fully the writer's use of **sentence structure** in the **second last line**. (4 marks)
13. Why is the final statement of the poem ('that shit / fucked') an effective way to bring this poem to a close? (2 marks)