

# **This Story, However, is Not About Him: Elizabeth Nunez’s *Even in Paradise* and the Rejection of Lear**

by

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William Shakespeare has become a highly controversial and debated figure in the realm of postcolonial literary theory. As an emblem of the British literary canon, he can be considered representative of the cultural domination and oppression of those living under British colonial rule. However, increasingly, the works of Shakespeare have been appropriated by writers within the postcolonial tradition, and the source material has been shaped to allow an ideology inclusive of liberalism and anticolonialism. Elizabeth Nunez’s *Even in Paradise*, therefore, is a landmark text in bringing this iconic tragedy to the Caribbean context, placing its action in the vividly portrayed settings of Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica. Broadly, the questions I wish to explore include *why* Nunez has chosen *King Lear* as a source text. Which aspects of Shakespeare’s play are drawn out and emphasized, and which are potentially lost? More specifically, the particular focus of this study will be placed firmly on the character of Peter Ducksworth, the novel’s parallel to Lear, a man of English descent who considers himself to be a ‘true Trini’. Nunez appears to reject the centrality of Lear, from the titular character of Shakespeare’s nihilistic tragedy to a man of ambiguous identity and position, a man almost on the periphery of the novel’s main action, and yet ever present in the mind of its narrator, Émile Baxter. Within the novel’s acknowledgements, Nunez refers to an encounter with ‘an aging white Barbadian man whose family had lived for generations in their magnificent house’ as a moment which ‘fired my imagination’ for this novel.

Nonetheless, she adds the comment: ‘This story, however, is not about him’. My study will explore Elizabeth Nunez’s crafting of the character of Peter Ducksworth, through considering his connections to British colonial rule, his place in the contemporary Caribbean socio-political landscape and the extent to which he fulfils or marks a departure from the generic role of tragic hero.

Elizabeth Nunez’s novel *Even in Paradise*, published in early 2016, begins with an unusual acknowledgement. The author remarks: “My sister Judith Vera will probably not remember this, but she was the one who fired my imagination when she took me up a hill in Barbados”, where they met “an aging white Barbadian man whose family had lived for generations in their magnificent house with a miraculous view of a rolling green valley, once a sugarcane plantation, edged by the glistening blue Caribbean Sea. This story, however, is not about him.” Nunez’s comment is simultaneously illuminating and ambiguous. This vivid image of an inspirational moment, with richly descriptive language conjuring for the reader a vision of a transformative, creative experience, is immediately undercut with an emphatic dismissal of the centrality of this unnamed individual to the actual, completed text. The novel is evidently an appropriation of William Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (c.1606), transporting the action of this iconic tragedy to the contemporary Caribbean region (specifically Trinidad, Barbados and Jamaica). Consequently, why does its author feel the need to emphasise that this novel is categorically *not* “about” this Lear-like figure? If this is the case, then why mention the incident at all? This essay will consider the possible implications and motivations of Nunez’s intriguing comment within a broader analysis of the text as a whole, with the intention of proposing a theory that Nunez’s novel involves a dual rejection: that of both *King Lear* and *King Lear*. By this statement, I mean that *Even in Paradise* can be read as refuting not only the centrality of the titular character of Shakespeare’s play to the action of this realist novel, but as simultaneously offering a wider interrogation of British cultural hegemony in the Caribbean.

*Even in Paradise*, I will argue, could well be understood as a work which both endorses and illustrates a notion of plurality, through an egalitarian, plural approach to characterisation, with a wide and diverse group of voices. It also illustrates a plurality of locations through the splitting of the action across three distinct islands, and a plurality of genres, with an employment of a mosaic of generic tropes and techniques. Broadly, the questions I wish to explore in this essay include *why* Nunez has chosen *King Lear* as a source text, as well as the implications of this choice. How does this text engage not only with the primary material, but equally with the critical tradition that this play has spurred? More specifically, the particular focus of this study will be placed firmly on the character of Peter Ducksworth, the novel’s parallel to Lear, a man of English descent who considers himself to be a “true Trini” (249). The role of Lear, embodied by Ducksworth, is transformed from the noble, socially elevated character of Shakespeare’s nihilistic tragedy to a man of ambiguous identity and position, a man almost on the periphery of the novel’s main action, and yet ever present in the mind of its narrator, Émile Baxter.

This reading of Nunez's, in my view, radical interrogation of *King Lear* will seek to explore the careful crafting of this character, through a consideration of Ducksworth's connections to former British colonial rule, his place in the contemporary Caribbean socio-political landscape and the extent to which he fulfils or marks a departure from the generic role of tragic hero.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is now iconic for what many regard as its pervading nihilism, and a mood of unrelenting, desolate bleakness, punctuated rarely by humour or relief, thus marking something of a contrast to many of his earlier tragedies. After a long period of being predominantly out of favour, as evidenced by Nahum Tate's innovative adaptation of the work as a re-envisioned tragicomedy which premiered to great success in 1681 (the popularity of Tate's production resulted in *King Lear* not being performed in its original form until the early decades of the nineteenth century), this play has been continuously elevated from the second half of the twentieth century by such prominent critics as Stanley Wells, who has referred to the play as "its author's finest literary achievement" (1). The emphasis on the work as a "literary" success here is notable. A notion that the text is particularly literary in nature, with a specific concern relating to the challenge of portraying its violent storm on stage, has been a disruptive element of this play's theatrical history. An additional challenge has been the fact that the text is also a remarkably unstable one, a much-debated concern in Shakespearean textual scholarship. First printed in 1608, this play originally appeared under the title: the "True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of Lear", more commonly referred to by critics as the "First Quarto". The issue lies in the fact that this Quarto differs significantly to the version of *King Lear* published in the First Folio of 1623. G.R. Hibbard has observed that the Quarto of 1608 contains around 300 lines which are not to be found in the Folio, and that the Folio contains approximately 100 lines not found in the Quarto (1). In addition to this somewhat confused state of affairs, it was of course Heminges and Condell, the compilers of the Folio, who categorised the work under "Tragedies" despite the mention of "Historie" in the title of the Quarto version, cementing a continuing understanding of this work which is filtered through the specific formal context of dramatic tragedy.

The tone of Nunez's work differs drastically to that of Shakespeare's play. The novel charts the lives of the Ducksworth family through the voice of Émile Baxter, a family friend, who appears to echo the role of the King of France, a marginal character in the source text. Émile's fascination with Peter Ducksworth's youngest daughter, Corinne (the novel's parallel to Cordelia), acts as a driving force in *Paradise*. The novel opens with a sense of this slow-building romantic infatuation: "I met Corinne Ducksworth when she was a young girl, just turned twelve. There was nothing about her or about the day I first saw her to give me the slightest warning that years later I would fall hopelessly in love with her" (11). Through beginning the novel with a singular personal pronoun, a sense of intimacy is immediately established, an early indication that a developing personal relationship will play a major role in the narrative. Nonetheless, despite this key thread of plot, the novel is filled with subplots, interweaving diverse narratives and voices in a complex and intricate manner.

Not only has the ending been dramatically altered in order to avert the tragic death of Cordelia (instead ending with Corinne's marriage to Émile, thus allowing the novel's ending to work as generically comedic), but the novel is also broadly optimistic in tone, as opposed to endorsing the radically pessimistic outlook of its source text. Nunez avoids the nihilistic notion that "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods;/ They kill us for their sport" (*King Lear* Sc.15. 35-36). Rather, *Paradise* ends with a sense of hope and optimism, as Émile remarks: "Now when I stand on the veranda and look out at that dazzling blue sea, the future shimmers before me full of wondrous possibilities" (320).

Nonetheless, this novel is not without its tragic elements, including the emotional abuse and manipulation of Émile's former classmate and friend Albert Glazal by his fiancée Glynis Ducksworth, Peter's eldest daughter. Glynis acts as the text's equivalent of Goneril, achieved through the nuanced portrayal of a troubled filial relationship between herself and Peter Ducksworth. An unnerving disregard for the welfare of her father is exposed through her attempts to transform his beloved home into retirement flats, reflecting Goneril's refusal to obey her father's demands for improved hospitality whilst he stays as her guest, ultimately leading to a series of furious accusations from Lear: "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend" (Sc.4. 251). Albert's parallel is slightly less clear, although the Duke of Albany is the most obvious candidate due to his romantic relationship with Glynis, a mirroring of Albany's marriage to Goneril, alongside his gradual recognition of the amoral actions of his fiancée which eventually leads to their separation. The parallels between King Lear and Peter Ducksworth offer the clearest example of Nunez's interrogation of elements of the generic category of tragedy, achieved through the correlating experiences of mental breakdown, public humiliation and death. Ducksworth's increasingly fragile mental state is suggested at Glynis's engagement party:

"But I still have my wits about me." A vein popped out from Ducksworth's hairline, blue and swollen, and ran down his forehead to the space between his eyebrows. "I am not some doddering old man." He pulled off his jacket and tossed it on the railing. "I am virile!" he shouted out. (152).

That this moment should be read as indicative of abruptly apparent mental instability is evidenced through the reactions of the others present: "We were all taken aback. I saw Douglas's mother tighten her hold on her husband's arm" (152). The act of undressing is a direct allusion to Lear's poignant mental breakdown in the storm: "Off, off, you lendings!" (Sc.11. 98). This gradual deterioration of Peter Ducksworth's mental and physical health reflects the fall of Lear, as both monarch and man, and ensures that the emotional weight of this tragedy is present in the novel.

As a result, it is clear that *Paradise* makes use of certain tropes of the generic category of *tragedy*. However, its relationship to this form is a complex one. It is the actions of King Lear which appear to dominate in Shakespeare's bleak play, as events are triggered by Lear's initial action in the opening scene. Shakespeare's foolish king is the vehicle for a consideration of the perils of old age, filial ingratitude, metaphorical and actual blindness and the dangers of a monarch who, in the words of the Fool, "shouldst not have been old before thou hadst been wise" (Sc.5. 40-41). As such, critical interpretations of the text have been inclined to recognise the fall of Lear as the archetypal downfall of the tragic hero, a key trope of the tradition of classical tragedy. Lear's foolish attempt at a tripartite division of his kingdom initiates the destructive impulses of this play, leading to violence, displacement and ultimately death. His lack of wisdom precipitates this devastation, and his downfall is consequently recognised, at least in part, as having been caused by his own actions, further centralising this character within the play. Nonetheless, both Samuel Johnson and A.C. Bradley have admitted to feeling distressed by the play's closing moments, suggesting that its ending surpasses the norms of tragedy. Samuel Johnson's statement is one of transparent upset: "I was many years ago so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I know not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor" (159). Bradley, also, candidly remarks: "If I read *King Lear* simply as a drama, I find that my feelings call for this 'happy ending'. I do not mean the human, the philanthropic, feelings, but the dramatic sense" (215). He continues to compare the resolution of *Lear* to that of other Shakespearean tragedies including a single, titular central figure: "The former [feelings of humanity and philanthropy] wish Hamlet and Othello to escape their doom; the latter [dramatic sense] does not; but it does wish Lear and Cordelia to be saved" (215). Surely, adds Bradley, "the tragic emotions have been sufficiently stirred already" (215). This sentiment fits in with Bradley's wider, somewhat provocative conclusion that "*King Lear* seems to me Shakespeare's greatest achievement, but it seems to me *not* his best play" (208). In part, this appears to be due to a disappointment in, or questioning of, the play's fulfilling of its generic obligations.

Bradley admits to considering *Lear* from two differing viewpoints, the first recognising the work as a drama and the second as "a purely imaginative realization" (212). For Bradley, *King Lear* is "imperfectly dramatic", and far more successful at achieving "imaginative effect" on the page (212). Altogether, he argues, the "greatness" of *King Lear* "consists partly in imaginative effects of a wider kind" (223). As a drama, however, it risks taking us "beyond the strictly tragic point of view" (217). In Bradley's critical readings, character is often the paramount concern, and tragedy stems from the tragic flaw of the individual. In *Lear*, however, when the final scene arrives "the King has for a long while been passive" (242). Therefore, in his view, the suffering appears to be too deep, too horrific, to be a suitable response for Lear's flawed actions. I would suggest that the concepts highlighted by Bradley's readings of this play are simultaneously interrogated and complicated by *Paradise*, through its rejection of an approach which centralises either character or genre, instead offering a nuanced employment of generic categories and a cast of involved characters.

The change of form is used as a strength, as the dramatic potential of this stage-play is harnessed and filtered through the egalitarian structures of the realist novel. The “imaginative effects” which Bradley so admires are an intrinsic component of the novel form, and Nunez incorporates vivid imagery and detailed description to elicit both sympathy and empathy from the reader. Nonetheless, Bradley’s individualistic notion of tragedy as focused on one central character, the action resulting almost solely from their tragic flaw, is emphatically avoided. Nunez complicates the idea of a “good” tragedy, favouring a complex and interwoven narrative, and a mosaic of generic tropes.

A key concern in the genre of tragedy is the notion that the fall of a tragic hero relies upon this hero having had a high status in the first place. To put it simply: the higher the status, the greater the fall. However, Nunez has reduced the social standings of this novel’s main protagonists, destabilising the significance of this Lear-like figure to the tragic drive of the narrative. Immediately, this lends itself to the plurality of the socio-political landscape portrayed, an egalitarian approach to characterisation which is relatively typical of the novel form. Nonetheless, Ducksworth remains at a somewhat raised social standing, due to his wealth and European ancestry, allowing this Lear a limited, yet distinct, platform from which to fall.

Émile’s father, Dr. Baxter, is revealed to be highly aware of Ducksworth’s place in the social hierarchy of Trinidad, and self-conscious in his own use of formal language: “Dark-skinned men in important positions, men like my father, were careful to speak the Queen’s English” (21-22). Such behavioural codes are deemed important, suggests Émile, for the darker-skinned men of the island in order to demonstrate a particular social status. In contrast, Ducksworth “was white; there would be no question that he definitely belonged to Trinidad’s upper class” (22). Ducksworth is shown to be aware of this status, as on meeting Albert Glazal he remarks that he has not met his father socially: “*Not meeting your father socially. Not running in the same circles. We both knew what he meant*”, Émile observes, “Not at the cocktail parties or the dinner parties Trinidad’s high society hosted. Definitely not at the Yacht Club” (74). Ducksworth’s connections to the Caribbean’s colonial past are presented as having ensured his raised social status, and his fall (both literal and metaphorical, in this case) reflects not only that of a Shakespearean tragic hero, but also, I would suggest, purposefully echoes the fall of the imperial powers in the region, achieved through complex motifs including allusions to his colonial predecessors. After all, his fall parallels the fall of the ultimate figure of British political authority (a king of Britain, although admittedly an ancient one). Repeated reflective passages within the narrative dwell on the Caribbean’s colonial history frequently and directly remark on the complicit role of Ducksworth’s planter ancestors in this traumatic history, alongside their role in contributing towards his current position as a wealthy man: “To get to Ducksworth’s house, we had to pass tiny shacks. Black people lived in those shacks, the children of enslaved Africans Ducksworth’s people had brought in chains to the Caribbean.” (115). Through such interwoven connections, Ducksworth’s fall is presented as not only that of a generic tragic hero, but also as a deeper consideration of the fall of oppressive British colonial control in the Caribbean.

Understandings of Shakespearean tragedy have undoubtedly been victim to a critical obsession with reading the tragic genre from Eurocentric perspectives, with hegemonic influences playing a key role in critical conceptions of tragedy. In his seminal work *The Death of Tragedy*, George Steiner remarked that “tragedy as a form of drama is not universal... that representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragic drama is distinctive of the western tradition” (3). This belief was certainly not limited to Steiner, and has been rightfully challenged by numerous critics. Andrew Gerstle has offered a convincing direct challenge to Steiner’s comment, remarking: “What if some faraway oriental land had a theatrical tradition comparable in seriousness and intensity to that of the West? And what if... this exotic theatre had produced more powerful, more effective, more sophisticated tragedy?” (50). Nonetheless, the classical origins of tragedy as a distinct form have resulted in such a view being widely held and influential. In his momentous work *Tragedy*, Clifford Leech remarks: “For Europe- and Europe alone provided tragedy as we know it, until it lent its findings to the rest of the world- tragedy began in Greece” (12). However, what of the distinction between classical tragedy and Shakespearean tragedy? Are Shakespeare’s tragedies still seen through this Eurocentric perspective? Singh and Shahani have remarked that Shakespeare studies “has now become a more fractured discursive field, allowing for a new politics of appropriation that emphasize representations of non-European cultures and the fraught histories of European contact with them” (127). Therefore, they claim: “postcolonial interventions in Shakespeare studies do not simply suggest a dethroning of the canonical bard”, instead they have “opened up the works to competing histories and a plurality of socio-political contexts- the marks of the postcolonial condition” (127). It is this notion of “plurality” which appears to pervade the use of genre, tone and depictions of the socio-political landscape at work in *Even in Paradise*, and this plurality rests in part upon a distancing of the patriarchal figure of Peter Ducksworth, who remains resolutely on the periphery of the novel’s main action, without sacrificing his generically tragic value.

“Peter Ducksworth”, states Émile, “considered himself a Trinidadian, a Caribbean man, someone who would be completely at home in any of the English-speaking Caribbean islands”. Detailed physical descriptions of Ducksworth’s mannerisms and gestures reinforce this understanding: “he spoke with his whole body, with his head, his shoulders, his hands- very un-English expressive movements punctuating the rise and fall of his Trinidadian lilt” (16). However, Ducksworth’s national identity is complicated through a number of factors. As Émile remarks, in a reflection of Jean Rhys’s Rochester in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, “Peter Ducksworth was not English or European either” (16). His casual use of the regional, colloquial phrase “*Too-tool-bay*” is met with astonishment, as Émile admits: “it surprised me that a man who looked like an Englishman, a very tanned one to be sure, would use that common Trinidadian expression” (21). The complex nature of Ducksworth’s self-proclaimed national identity is demonstrated not only by his use of language and physical appearance, but also by his cultural tastes: “Ducksworth loved calypso and steelpan.

Carnival was his favourite festival” (16). Nunez purposefully complicates this simplistic claim to such a cultural identity, as Ducksworth’s uncomfortable connections to his English ancestors are highlighted both explicitly and implicitly throughout the text. There is also the suspicion that his move to Barbados is motivated by an intention to encourage his daughters to find, in the words of the husband of Émile’s nanny, Trevor, ““white husbands””, with Trevor continuing to cynically suggest that Ducksworth is ““Trini to the bone. Except when it comes to his daughters.”” (33). Such portrayals of Ducksworth present the nuances and subtleties involved in presenting a sense of Anglo-Trinidadian cultural identity in the postcolonial social landscape. Ducksworth is necessarily connected to the long history of hegemonic control over these islands through his wealth, ancestry and property; nonetheless, he has been shaped by the political, social and cultural environment into which he has been born. This novel analyses Ducksworth’s confident assertion of being a “true Trini” without rejecting this claim to such a national identity. Rather, this identity is blurred and destabilised through contradiction and loaded descriptive language.

Perhaps the most evident sign of Ducksworth’s ambiguous identity is his home. This Barbadian mansion is described as “a huge old colonial-style house... imposing, standing there on the top of the hill, glistening in the brilliant sunshine” (72). Of course, the mention of “colonial” immediately relates Ducksworth to his English, slave-owning ancestors, the house “imposing” over the landscape through its size and location in an uncomfortable echo of its original colonial occupants, who similarly imposed their control upon the peoples and lands of these islands. From this technique of elevation, the reader is then jolted by the sudden bathetic comment: “The charcoal-gray slate roof on top sloped down over it like an enormous hat. Or beach umbrella, Albert said” (72). This element of ridiculousness undercuts the grandiose description of Ducksworth’s home, and is complemented by a stressing of its lack of functionality: “The house itself was framed on each floor with a long line of tall French windows bordered by olive-green shutters”, however, these “were not the sort of shutters one found in the country, meant to be opened to let in the breeze and then shut again to keep out the rain or the sun at noon [...] These were decorative shutters” (72). It is stressed that these “decorative” shutters are purposeless, acting as artificial props for an ostentatious façade of sophisticated domesticity (Jones 44). A sense of the ridiculousness of Ducksworth’s flamboyant home is furthered by his own physical appearance on Émile’s first viewing: “a big-bellied white man” stretched onto a precarious hammock (72). There is, surely, symbolism in the fact that it is this very artificiality and superficiality which leads to Ducksworth’s death; a fragile split in the railings of the veranda, caused by rot, had been painted over and disguised, leading Ducksworth to fall through the rotten wood (Jones 44).

In clear contrast, the functionality of Émile’s small cottage in Jamaica is stressed through a detailed, precise description: “The cottage was tiny but spotless, furnished simply with an old-fashioned bed with iron railings” (196). The utilitarianism of this interior is highlighted, the iron “railings” a seeming antithesis of the flimsy, purposeless wooden “railings” bordering Ducksworth’s grand veranda.



The decorative shutters of the Ducksworth mansion are contrasted by practical “cloth curtains” hung for privacy in place of doors. The outside space is not intended for opulent, panoramic views of paradisaal beaches, but rather taken up with a functioning vegetable garden, to Émile’s delight: “Manure! The soil had been fertilized! With some water it would turn rich dark brown again”, allowing him to plant “cucumbers, tomatoes, and cabbage too! I could have fresh vegetables and garden salad for dinner” (196). It is noted that the cottage had been in the possession of a member of domestic service, a housekeeper, and this sense of practical, proletarian functionality creates a clear distinction to the bourgeois extravagance of Ducksworth’s house. Through techniques of bathos, thus exposing the impracticality of Ducksworth’s property, alongside a clear use of contrast in the vocabulary employed to describe Émile’s home, thus contrasting semantic fields of grandeur and utilitarian domesticity, Ducksworth is further presented as a victim of his own increasingly delusional feelings of centrality to both his adult family and local community, and to his conviction that property can be used to solve his personal grievances.

The practicality of property acts as an enduring area of moral concern throughout the novel, as Peter Ducksworth’s acceptance of Glynis’s accusations leads to an imposition of behavioural conditions on Corinne, which she must conform to if she wishes to be recognised as the inheritor of her home. Glynis has revealed to her father that Corinne is tutoring a young boy from a Rastafari family in the impoverished area of Tivoli Gardens, in Jamaica. Ducksworth’s initial praise for this kindness is soon revealed to be hollow, as he begins by stating that “He admired her spunk [...] he often felt guilty about his people’s past in the islands, how they got rich on the backs of black people. How he got rich. It was charitable of her to want to give something back” (234). However, the tone changes when he requests that she not return to Tivoli Gardens, and instead allow him to simply “donate money to the community center” (234). Her refusal to obey this order leads to his enraged threat of disinheritance, unless she agrees not to return. When she resists, insisting that she has already promised that she will continue to tutor the boy, the impracticality of Ducksworth’s grand property is thus exposed fully. He is unable to use the threat of disinheritance to force Corinne to distance herself from the black people of Jamaica and to obey his wishes. This, Émile observes, is a result of Ducksworth having committed the tragic flaw of “confusing flattery with love”, in having trusted Glynis’s praise and manipulative tactics (154). Ducksworth’s property is, therefore, not only impractical in terms of physical features, such as size and design, but also in terms of acting as a tool for personal gain. He is unable to use the threat of removing property rights from Corinne to ensure that she obey his personal convictions of how she ought to behave. Her resistance takes on, I would argue, a greater dimension of meaning than Cordelia’s act of rebellion in *King Lear*. Rather than a stressing of the limits of dutiful filial love, Corinne seeks to establish her own autonomy as an individual, and to resist her father’s dismissive and unjust demands of adjustment to her behaviour, or his shaping of her understanding of a personal identity as a Caribbean woman.

Frequently, descriptions of Ducksworth are physically discomfiting, with Émile remarking on his being “big-bellied, yellowish hair like sand, receding a bit at the hairline, but still, full, substantial”, with teeth which are unpleasantly “crooked” and “gray” (73). These physical descriptions of Ducksworth are simultaneously uncomfortable and indicative of his imposing physical presence, he is, after all, still presented as a “substantial” man (73). In part, the language used supports a sense of degeneration at a distance. Émile has spent little time with Ducksworth over the years, living a separate life on the islands of Jamaica and Trinidad, meaning that Ducksworth’s gradual physical deterioration is unwitnessed by the narrator, and consequently must be presented in a sudden manner to the reader. Whereas the physical and mental collapse of Shakespeare’s *Lear* is exposed to the audience or reader, portrayed in a developing, tense manner, Ducksworth’s physical transformation is, for the most part, hidden. Rather, it is acknowledged at certain intervals, and the degeneration of his mental health is merely implied. One of the clearest indications of Ducksworth’s changed state is this moment of surprisingly poignant reminiscence from Émile:

He was wearing an off-white cotton shirt and tan knee-length shorts. The shorts were fastened below the rise of his belly and the shirt, buttoned in one hole, flapped open, exposing a scattering of thin, straight strands of gray hair on the mound that billowed around his navel. Once a handsome man- he had seemed handsome to me six years earlier- the sun, and I suspected rum mostly, had leathered his skin. It was tough and patchy, the lines around his eyes and mouth deepened to shallow gullies. (76).

Ducksworth’s undressed state, denoting a disregard for personal presentation, alongside indications of clearly poor health, cannot fail to merit sympathy from the reader, especially when contrasted to Émile’s memory of a healthy, capable man. A long-running theme of illness is certainly present in this novel, as evidenced by the extended reference to Ducksworth’s treatment for malaria from Dr. Baxter at the novel’s opening. Nonetheless, this clear breakdown of physical and mental health is kept firmly on the periphery of the novel’s main action, a subtle thread of plot which slowly emerges in preparation for the climactic, disastrous, Boxing Day party.

The works of Shakespeare are far from being an unusual influence in Elizabeth Nunez’s work. *Prospero’s Daughter* (2006) has proved a particularly successful and influential interrogation of the Shakespearean canon, and the Bard is present to a lesser extent in the self-conscious narration of Justin Peters, a professor of literature, in *Grace* (2003). Nonetheless, despite its function as a Bildungsroman, *Paradise* marks a determined departure from its main literary influence, refusing to allow *Lear* the role of central tragic hero, with other characters and action merely orbiting around him. Instead, it foregrounds a rich tapestry of individual voices, a mosaic of motives and layers of ideology, all the while unrelentingly questioning its source text whilst simultaneously engaging with and valuing it.

Transporting the action from a murky ancient Britain to the emphatically bright and vivid setting of the contemporary Caribbean, as well as adapting its dramatic dialogue into a lyrical prose, the adaptation process allows Nunez the freedom to explore *King Lear* in a complex and illuminating way. The narrative is frequently fragmented through techniques of prolepsis and analepsis, short frame narratives, historical digressions, long passages of thought process which read very like an intentional reflection of dramatic soliloquising, as well as various other devices of fragmentation. These work to reign in any tendency to monolithic narrative, instead favouring pluralism.

Nonetheless, the works of Shakespeare are necessarily problematic in this transformed setting of the post-colonial Caribbean region. Shakespeare's works are, needless to say, controversial and much-debated texts in the realm of postcolonial literary theory. Frequently employed as an emblem of the British literary canon, Shakespeare can easily be associated with the cultural domination and oppression of those living under British colonial rule, and the establishment of a Eurocentric cultural hegemony in these colonised regions. However, the works of Shakespeare have equally been influentially appropriated by key writers within the postcolonial tradition, and this source material has been shaped to allow an ideology inclusive of liberalism and anticolonialism. Much critical attention has been diverted by the impact of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in the Caribbean, and the interrogation of this material by highly influential writers and activists such as Aimé Césaire and George Lamming. However, *King Lear* is, comparatively, rarely discussed in relation to postcoloniality. Elizabeth Nunez's *Even in Paradise*, therefore, is a landmark text in bringing this iconic tragedy to the postcolonial Caribbean context, and the refusal to centralise Lear reflects Singh and Shahani's notion of a Shakespeare which has become a more "fractured discursive field" through the contributions of postcolonial theoretical models, and its "plurality of socio-political contexts" as marks of "the postcolonial condition".

John Marx has observed that postcolonial literature is frequently held to either "repudiate the canon" or to "revise canonical texts and concepts" (83). As a result: "Readers have learned to approach postcolonial literature as a critique of Western tradition involving the rewriting of specific works (*The Tempest* and *Heart of Darkness*, for instance) and the appropriation of entire genres (the *Bildungsroman*, for example, or the domestic romance)" (83). Understandably, this has led to a critical debate on whether such examples of "rewriting" in a context related to postcolonial ideological and theoretical models inadvertently supports the centrality and significance of these texts in the European literary canon, and whether critical responses ultimately endorse an elevation of these texts in the 'Western tradition' through employing them too closely and deeply to analyses of postcolonial responses. Nonetheless, maintains Marx: "To acknowledge that postcolonial literature has entered the ivory tower, I contend, is not to negate its capacity to have widespread effects" (91). A sense of inclusive intertextuality pervades *Even in Paradise*, with allusions to writers as diverse as Emily Brönte, George Lamming and William Butler Yeats.

This drawing together of literary allusions across temporal, social and geographical divides marks a wider interrogation of the categorisation of the English-speaking literary canon, a thoughtful consideration of the implications of a mosaic of source texts which matches the mosaic of literary characters. Nonetheless, these writers are frequently not accepted at face value, but interrogated in a manner paralleling the deep analysis of this novel's main source text.

For example, when Corinne offers her edition of Barbadian writer George Lamming's influential *In the Castle of My Skin* to Émile, it leads to a detailed critical debate between these two characters. At first, Corinne acts the part of "teacher", and Émile the "pupil", as she lectures on Lamming "writing about the colonial experience [...] the pull and tug of the child of the colonies, his affection for the mother country, and at the same time his anger for the subservient role he was forced to play in a country that was his own" (98). However, Corinne ultimately concludes that she finds Lamming "'too didactic'" (99). At this, Émile "felt compelled to defend Lamming", stating that "'He had to do more than tell a story; he had to give people a sense of who they were. Are.'" (99). Interestingly, this polemic is shown to be met with an unenthusiastic response from Corinne: "She slumped down in her seat. *Good*, I thought. *I am restoring the balance you tried to reverse. I am the teacher now; you are the student*" (99-100). Émile's apparent desire to enforce a form of control over this critical debate, and in particular over Corinne's response to the literature in question, may well be read as a purposeful allusion to wider debates in postcolonial literary studies on the place of the postcolonial response, the often tense dynamic between these literary works. As a result, these allusions to both Caribbean and Western European authors could well be seen as evidencing an interrogation of long-standing British literary hegemony, and of seeking a Walcottian sense of "balance" and greater integration between the two canons.<sup>12</sup>

So, if this text is not about *Lear*, then *who* is it about? The homodiegetic narrative voice of Émile Baxter appears to shape the narrative, to the extent that Émile interprets and reports events and speech offered by other characters, demonstrating an authoritative control over these alternative narrative voices. For example, it is Corinne who informs Émile of the background to Douglas Fairbanks's unjust dislike of Albert, due to the Lebanese heritage of the Glazal family. Nonetheless, the story is told only through the voice of Émile, who regularly interrupts and evaluates this strand of the narrative. The authority of Émile's narrative voice, which both introduces and ends the novel, marks a drastic alteration to *King Lear*, in which the King of France speaks only a minute number of the total lines contained in the play, remaining very much on the edges of the main action despite his high status.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Walcott (1930-2017)

<sup>2</sup> The sense of balance and integration between canons I refer to here is offered, for example, by the essay "The Muse of History". This essay analyses the adaptability of literary traditions, integrated with a profound interrogation of opposing perspectives on historiography, ending with a sense of optimism through an Edenic understanding of the Caribbean as a place of intersections between ideologies and cultural traditions: "I give the strange and bitter and yet ennobling thanks for the monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds, like the halves of a fruit seamed by its own bitter juice, that exiled from your own Edens you have placed me in the wonder of another, and that was my inheritance and your gift" (64).

Émile's telling of the story also interestingly reflects a directly acknowledged concern with the process of telling historical narratives. The narrative voice is one of hindsight, Émile is clearly engaged in looking back on events, often remarking on developments which are yet to occur. His narration includes several moments of discursive passages, in particular historical outlines. His view of historiography is one of complexities and blurred divisions, as well as being politically astute:

The past to me was also the present. It affected our thoughts, our actions. I had been to Ducksworth's house, saw where he lived- in a mansion on top of a hill with a spectacular view of the sea. He owned the land where his house stood, the two fat fingers extending out to the sea too. To get to Ducksworth's house, we had to pass tiny shacks. Black people lived in those shacks, the children of the enslaved Africans Ducksworth's people had brought in chains to the Caribbean. How much had changed in their lives? They were poor; Ducksworth was rich, still as rich if not richer than his people who had made their fortunes from the suffering of others. (115)

This engagement with history is deeply immersed in postcolonial theory, and is undoubtedly enhanced through a notion that the narrator is, himself, fulfilling a role of historian, chronicling events both fictional and real. Nonetheless, Émile's narratorial authority does not, I would contend, reduce the impact or plurality of the diverse voices presented in this text. Despite the desire clearly ascribed to him, Émile's narration is frequently immersed in the ideologies of various characters, and the authority of his narrative voice is undercut through the uncertainty and fluidity of his own narration, as well as through the strength of the alternative voices presented in the novel.

A point worth serious consideration is the relatively recent development of a critical interpretation of Shakespeare's *Lear* which proposes that Lear may act as a vehicle for political questioning through his role as monarch, as opposed to a potentially reductive and problematic view that this foolish king merely acts as a vessel for universal emotional and spiritual enquiry. After all, readings which incorporate such essentialism are opening themselves up to a reasonable critique of a controversial notion of universality, when various cultures have their own codes of universal values, alongside the realities of hegemonic influences in these perceptions of humanism and universalism. It may well be, then, that Nunez can be read as purposefully opening up wider political interpretations through her use of this material. Margot Heinemann has argued that "*King Lear* is very much a political play- that is a play concerned with power and government in the state with public and civil life, and not solely with private relationships and passions" (75). Consequently, Heinemann concludes, "the play needs inescapably to be seen *both* as an individual's loss of power and control *and* as the breakdown of a social and political system: that is indeed its point" (75).

Janette Dillon also combines the political and personal in her claim that Lear “must learn that his offence against the kingdom is not just political, in the sense that he makes a wrong decision about how to govern, but also ethical and humanitarian, in that he comes to understand his own responsibility for rooted social injustice” (105). Ultimately, states Dillon, “*Lear* forces its hero to take on a transformed set of values” (106). These balanced views reflect a reasonable negotiation between the political and the personal realms in Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Nonetheless, there are critics who have sought to tilt the balance more definitely one way or the other, creating a critical binary of what can be somewhat loosely termed: *political Lear* versus *personal Lear*.

Tom McAlindon and Jonathan Dollimore offer clear examples of these contrasting readings, with Dollimore proposing that “far from transcending in the name of an essential humanity the gulf which separates the privileged from the deprived, the play insists on it” (192). As a self-identified cultural materialist, Dollimore is wary of criticism which recognises supposedly universal aspects of the human condition, instead focussing on hegemonic influences in constructions of the human experience. Dollimore offers the resolute conclusion that “*King Lear* is, above all, a play about power, property and inheritance” (197). His findings have been strenuously challenged by Tom McAlindon, who maintains that “compassionate love emerges as the supreme value of this play. And by no means”, he maintains, “does it signify a socio-political dead-end” (88). Rather, claims McAlindon, *King Lear* “appeals more profoundly both to the heart and the mind than any other play of Shakespeare” (86). Could it be, then, that Nunez’s distancing of Lear opens up wider political implications in light of these dual strands of the play’s critical tradition? Certainly, the text does appear to be heavily invested in political considerations. Corinne’s polemical piece of journalism for the *Jamaica Examiner* is a clear example of this, exploring interconnections between race, class and land rights through an exposé on the underhand tactics of tourist companies in Barbados. This journalistic interlude in the novel elevates the importance of such interrogations, highlighting the injustice of blocked access to public beaches for local, black islanders. Nonetheless, this emphasis on political engagement does not limit the text’s capacity to elicit an emotional response. Ultimately, *Even in Paradise* offers a moving, emotionally stirring narrative whilst remaining highly politically astute, and is demonstrably unafraid to both highlight and question political injustices in the contemporary Caribbean region in which it is set.

Altogether, this essay has sought to highlight and explore a clear refusal to centralise this novel’s Lear-like figure to the narrative, an intention clearly indicated in this text’s acknowledgements, and implicitly reinforced through literary techniques including layered generic tropes, a wide cast of developed characters, a range of various specified locations and passages of explicitly stated sociohistorical questioning. This distancing of both Lear and *Lear* is immersed in wider literary and political implications, actively elevating themes of pluralism and diversity as opposed to a monolithic narrative with a centralised tragic hero, and working to interrogate and balance the relationship between the British and Anglophone Caribbean literary canons.

Reed Way Dasenbrock has remarked that a “respect in which the discussion of Shakespeare and the postcolonial has been simplified is that the discussion has focused on two Shakespeare plays, *The Tempest* and *Othello*, to the exclusion of the thirty-odd other plays in the canon” (105). Through *Even in Paradise*, Elizabeth Nunez has directly addressed this simplification, and has offered a radical exploration of the chosen Shakespearean text, whilst remaining wary of concerns that a “privileging of Shakespeare” may “inadvertently affirm its centrality to the canon” (Singh and Shahani 130). As Dasenbrock has eloquently observed, “the Shakespeare of relevance to the Caribbean cannot be handled as a dead text, as an object to be revered; it must be brought into connection with the lived realities of the Caribbean, intentionally or unintentionally” (108). *Even in Paradise*, I would argue, achieves this “relevance” to the “lived realities of the Caribbean”, without sacrificing the richness and value of the Shakespearean source text, creating a work which integrates a range of genres, voices, histories, literary allusions and locations to form a balanced, unified exploration of both *King Lear* and the realities of the contemporary Caribbean experience. Whilst original audiences of Shakespeare’s *Lear* would have engaged with the tragic and nihilistic deaths of its main protagonist and his youngest daughter, contemporary readerships are offered a nuanced, complex and profound interrogation of the very notion of a tragic hero. Ducksworth’s fall crosses temporal and generic boundaries; his demise mirrors the breakdown of political control experienced by his colonial ancestors, the deterioration of the physical and mental health of the individual and the accumulative consequences of the tragic flaw of falling for flattery. As a result, Nunez engages with the very definition of tragedy, its associations with British cultural hegemony and its relevance to contemporary audiences in the Caribbean and beyond.

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