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*I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.*

Prospero: The Well Intentioned Puppet Master

The Tempest’s plot begins with the titular storm severely damaging a royal sea vessel, stranding its noble passengers on a remote island. This seemingly chance event was actually orchestrated by the magician Prospero, the former Duke of Milan and current ruler of the island. Prospero saw that the travelers were none other than the people who usurped his throne, and concocted a plot that would result in his return to civilization and would ensure a grand future for his daughter, Miranda. In just the first few pages of the story, the readers are able to see two sides of Prospero. First, they see his powerful, angry, and vengeful side through the storm that utterly destroys the usurping king’s ship, though doing so while leaving the passengers unharmed. Afterwards, Prospero’s more gentle and compassionate side is shown with regards to Miranda. While telling the story of their unfortunate past, Prospero likens Miranda to a cherubim, or angel, whose smile kept him hopeful even in the darkest of days (Act 1, Scene 2). One of Prospero’s traits that may not be readily apparent, but is evident across everything he does, is his controlling nature. He left the passengers safe and alive so he could manipulate them and create a situation beneficial to him and his daughter. He uses his position of total authority and influence over his daughter to instill his vision of an ideal future in her, and manipulates her to that end. While the end result – his daughter in a position of high royalty and his return to society – is undeniably positive for his family, he manipulated everyone and everything around him to make his vision for the future a reality, with no input from other people it concerned, even his daughter. His overbearing power and influence with so little room for compromise make him a bad father, even though, he could argue, the ends justify the means.

Prospero has a long and complex history. The former Duke of Milan, father of Miranda was so invested in his studies and in the pursuit of knowledge that he gave his scheming brother Antonio the chance to usurp his throne. He and his daughter were helped by the honest lord Gonzalo, who gave them supplies before they were cast out onto the ocean with nothing but a raft. Prospero and Miranda eventually came across an abandoned island, where they have lived ever since. Upon reaching the island the pair met a resident of the island, a man named Caliban. He showed them how to survive on the island, and was taught and raised by Prospero until some kind of sexual encounter between Caliban and Miranda was interrupted by Prospero. After that, Prospero made Caliban his slave and uses him for physical labor. While the event could have been a misunderstanding, Prospero brutally punished Caliban, and showed him no mercy. Prospero’s uncompromising, controlling side continues to make itself evident.

Miranda has very few memories of her life before her arrival on the island. As such, the only influencing figure in her life is her father. Her father loves her very much, as is evident in lines like “I Have given you here a third of mine own life— Or that for which I live—who once again I tender to thy hand. All thy vexations were but my trials of thy love and thou hast strangely stood the test,” (Act 4, Scene 1) where he speaks incredibly highly of his daughter. Prospero wants nothing but happiness for her, though his vision of what was feasible for her happiness changes at the start of the play. Before seeing his enemies’ ship near his island, Prospero must have wanted to prepare Miranda for a happy but calm life of solitude on the island. It’s possible that Prospero figured telling her about how great the outside world is would only upset her in the long run, and that keeping her ignorant would let her live a simple life without worry. While it would have been the right thing to tell Miranda everything he knew, her happiness was his priority, even if that meant deciding what she did and did not know. All of this changes once Prospero sees the royal ship in the distance; he sees an opportunity to get revenge, and for him and his daughter to return to civilization. Naturally, he wants his daughter to become royalty, to continue the family line. He creates a plan to marry his daughter to the prince of Naples, which would seat his family in power in the very city that assisted in the usurping of his throne. His plan would also end with him returning to his hometown, Milan. This drastic change in plans lead him to telling his daughter about their past. In his own words, “Of thee, my dear one—thee my daughter, who art ignorant of what thou art, naught knowing of whence I am, nor that I am more better than Prospero, master of a full poor cell and thy no greater father…'Tis time I should inform thee farther.” (Act 1, Scene 2) In this scenario, Prospero recounting his past to Miranda served his ends, but it is entirely plausible that, had the ship never sailed by the island, Prospero would never have told Miranda about their unfortunate past. That sort of subtle manipulation underscores the kind of father Prospero really is.

Prospero divides the stranded group of survivors, with his main objective being the separation of Ferdinand from the rest of the group. He lures Ferdinand to his home and tells Ariel to cast a spell on both him and Miranda, causing them to fall in love with each other. Though he could have left it at that, he felt compelled to challenge their relationship, in order to solidify it, saying “They are both in either’s powers, but this swift business I must uneasy make lest too light winning make the prize light.” (Act 1, Scene 2) He made Ferdinand his slave for a few days, until the very end when he made the whole stranded party meet up. Another group was comprised of the usurping king Antonio, the king of Naples Alonso, the honest lord Gonzalo, and Alonso’s brother Sebastian. They explored the island and were tempted and mocked by spirits sent by Prospero until they reached his home, and were confronted while under his spell. Antonio never repented or apologized, but Alonso burst out into apologies and pleas for forgiveness upon seeing his son alive, with his future daughter-in-law. Prospero proves that he has some mercy in him by not killing them all where they stand, and instead invites them to stay the night while he fills them in on the events of the past twelve years. While this seems to go against his earlier attitude towards them, he shows that he is an amicable person so long as everything goes exactly as he plans it. Alonso’s repentance made up for Antonio’s lack thereof, and confirmed that Prospero’s grand scheme had been a complete success. He and his daughter would be returning to Italy, where she would be royalty and he could “…retire to Milan, where [he would] contemplate [his] death.” (Act 5 Scene 1)

While Prospero’s plans went by without a hitch, and he secured a happy and successful future for his daughter, he is still a bad father. Everyone should have a say in the development of their future and how they live their life, and Prospero simply does not offer that luxury to Miranda. She knows only what he wants her to know; she thinks exactly what he wants him to think. She was even made to fall in love with a total stranger because it would serve Prospero’s vision of her future. Though she loves her father, and her father loves her, she is completely ignorant to the extent of her father’s influence on her life. If Miranda remains ignorant of these facts her entire life, she would probably think very highly of her father. She would only see him as a supportive, influential figure who helped get her to where she was in her life. If someone told her the truth about her father, and explained in detail how he meticulously crafted each step of her life to lead to his desired outcome, she might begin to think differently. Her life and her mind have never really been hers to craft for herself. Prospero held great value in knowledge, learning, and cleverness, so it’s almost surprising that he does not believe in instilling these values in his daughter. Instead, he keeps her ignorant of important information, thinks for her, and makes decisions on her behalf. She has been doomed to a future of having other people do her thinking, and that probably will not change as queen; she’ll still be subservient, just to her husband instead of her father.

The Tempest is classified as a Comedy, with its romantic subplot, its fantastic elements, and its emphasis on the journey with an ultimately positive conclusion. That being said, there are tragic elements strewn throughout: Antonio’s betrayal of Prospero, the two separate attempted murders during the play, and even in the very beginning with people praying for their lives during the storm. One of the biggest, most overlooked tragedies of the entire play, however, is Miranda’s lack of input into her own future. She has been thrust into a life she did not choose, but rather one that was chosen for her by her father. Prospero’s intentions were noble, but there is no overlooking the fact that he was the only factor in determining his daughter’s fate. Prospero is like a puppet master, who moves his puppets around in whatever fashion suits him best. He brought his enemies to the island to toy with them, originally intending to enact his revenge for twelve years ago. He treats the island’s original denizens, Caliban and the spirits, like his slaves, and he makes sure his daughter does everything he wants her to. Prospero’s greatest successes – his magical abilities and his intellect – both play into his worst qualities as a father. He’s controlling and manipulative, has grand visions for his future and his daughter’s future, and, to top it off, he has the power to make his visions a reality.