

# CHAPTER 4 ANALYSIS OF THE SELECTED ENGLISH PLAY

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*

### Playwright's Profile

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 at Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England. He is an outstanding English poet and playwright, popularly referred to as the greatest dramatist of all times. He produced the largest and greatest body of literature than any other creative writer. He has a unique understanding of human behaviours, which is evident in the description and presentation of a broad diversity of characters and situations in his works.

William Shakespeare was comfortable with both tragic and comic plays. His dramatic pieces such as *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *King Lear*, *King Henry VIII*, *Comedy of Errors*, *The Winter's Tale* and of course, *The Tempest*, among many others, explore universal themes of power, justice, perseverance, love and death. There is no doubt that he has achieved worldwide and long-lasting recognition for his body of work, which continues to be taught and performed across the globe. Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616

### Subject Matter

The play revolves round Prospero, a magician who lived on an Island with his daughter, Miranda. It begins with a raging storm on the sea, with a ship at the mercy of the violent weather. The ship contains the King of Naples, Alonso, and his entourage, who were returning home to Italy after attending the marriage ceremony of his daughter, Claribel, in Tunis, North Africa.

It was Prospero who had initiated the storm, through the actions of Ariel, a spirit who can take any form. He was overthrown as the rightful Duke of Milan and left to die with his three-year old daughter Miranda by his brother, Antonio (who was also on the ship), with the help of King Alonso. The ship is lost, and the King and his entourage were separated on different places on Prospero's Island.

On the Island, there exists an ugly half human creature called Caliban, a son of a witch, Sycorax, who had ruled the island and made Ariel suffer exceedingly before Prospero came to the rescue. Caliban is made a slave because of his unruly behaviour and in fact begins to plot against Prospero with some members of the King's entourage.

In the meantime, Miranda and Ferdinand, the son of Alonso, fall in love. In the end, the King and those who plotted against Prospero learn their lessons and eventually, all the members are united. Prospero forgives his brother and the King; he sets Ariel free as he had earlier promised and he regains his position as the Duke of Milan.

### Plot

The play begins with report on the ship of a raging storm. Through dialogue, there is the indication of a shipwreck, as well as an introduction of certain characters in the play. Also, there is the introduction of the protagonist, Prospero, and Miranda, who fears for the lives of those on board the ship on the wild sea. Prospero recalls past experiences, intimating his daughter about how he was betrayed by the very characters on the ship. These revelations set the play in motion.

There is a complication in the play with the romantic relationship between Ferdinand and Miranda, who fell in love immediately after setting eyes on each other. Prospero however foils the love affair. The next act takes place at a different place on the island where Gonzalo (an old councillor who perhaps had saved Prospero and Miranda's lives while abandoned at sea) offers consolation and optimism to King Alonso, who had thought his son Ferdinand was dead after the shipwreck.

The plot further becomes more complex with Antonio's and Sebastine's plan to kill King Alonso. There is another comical alliance among Caliban, Trinculo (a jester) and Stephano (a drunk butler). The trio develops a plot against Prospero. Here, the climax of the play builds up.

In the conclusion, all the main characters are brought together before Prospero, who forgives all but warns them against further betrayal. Ariel is charged to prepare the proper sailing weather to guide Alonso and his entourage (including Prospero and Miranda) back to the royal fleet and then to Naples, where Ferdinand and Miranda are married. After discharging this task, Ariel is finally free. There is the unity of action across the scenes on the play as Prospero regains his lost possession and returns to the very home he was once banished from.

### **Characterisation**

**Prospero** – He is the main character in *The Tempest*. He is the rightful Duke of Milan, but is overthrown by his brother. He is a great sorcerer who lives and controls an Island. Prospero could be described as a victim and also a victor. He is initially depraved but at the end, he assumes control of all events, much to his favour. He dominates the play and his actions determine the fate of others, including his own daughter.

**Miranda** – She is Prospero's daughter. When she was a baby, she is left to die on the sea alongside her father. A significant aspect of her life is therefore spent on the island. She is beautiful and kind-hearted and this can be seen at the beginning of the play when she mourns the fate of those on the ship while the storm rages on. She is ignorant and innocent. In Miranda, one observes human frailty, suggestive that every human should possess the element of tenderness.

**Ariel** – He is a lively spirit and the chief servant to Prospero. He is a spirit but quite visible to his master, but not to any other person. Throughout the play, he is being subservient to Prospero's instructions. It is through Ariel's supernatural powers that events, planned by Prospero, were executed.

Ariel is also seen as a mischief maker. Regularly, he plays tricks on Caliban in order to put him in check, and also on Trinculo and Stephano. Ariel is a complex character in the play. His subservient attitude to Prospero seems to contrast his destructive tendency and mischief-making. It is only ironical that he, at the beginning of the play, raises a storm and at the end, helps ferry home the ship he almost destroyed.

**Caliban** – He is an antagonist in the play. He is the son of a witch named Sycorax, who ruled the Island with fear before Prospero arrived. He works as a slave under Prospero. Throughout the play, Caliban's objective is to overthrow Prospero and he constantly plots to do that. His hatred for the protagonist is further heightened as he tries to incorporate Trinculo and Stephano into his plot. He is said to have a bad temper and naturally rebellious.

**Antonio** – He is the brother of Prospero, who plotted the removal of Prospero as Duke of Milan. He, alongside Sebastian, also tried unsuccessfully to kill Alonso and his family. Antonio is the villain in the play. Unlike Caliban who simply protests against Prospero because of the way he is treated, Antonio is the mastermind behind Prospero and Miranda's travails. He is selfish and would do anything to assume control of any given situation. Even while Alonso mourns the loss of Ferdinand, Antonio's desire is to acquire power by getting rid of the king.

**Alonso** – He is the king of Naples who also banished Prospero from Milan. However, he suffers exceedingly for his attitude with the supposed death of his son, Ferdinand, the next ruler of Milan. In the end, he alters his steps by returning Prospero back to his old position as the rightful Duke of Milan.

**Sebastian** – He is the treacherous brother of King Alonso. He is an example of the expression "a green snake under the green grass". His outward personality is that of loyalty and obedience. However, his true intention is simply that of rebellion. He has no conscience. After the shipwreck, he liaises with Antonio to murder King Alonso. He is a symbol of deception and destruction.

**Ferdinand** – He is the son of Alonso, the presumed next ruler of Milan. He is a victim of circumstance because he is made to pay for the crimes of his father and Antonio. But his character portrays a young man who immediately falls in love with Miranda and perseveres till the end. He is a symbolic representation of every young man on the hard quest towards finding true love. But in the end, he comes out victorious in his travails, first experiencing joy that his father is not dead and ultimately marrying the beautiful Miranda.

**Gonzalo** – He is a kind servant, who secretly tucked in food, water and books on the little boat for Prospero and Miranda when they were abandoned at sea. Despite his loyalty to King Alonso, he assumes the responsibility of protecting the then helpless Prospero. He

serves as the comforter for the King during the presumed loss of Ferdinand and helps to search even when age tells on him. He is a man of principle, character and allegiance to truth and honesty.

## **Themes**

### ***Crave for power***

This is a recurrent theme in the play. Throughout the play, the plot is about the innate desire to possess power. It is Prospero's crave for power (knowledge) that led to his overthrow. It is Antonio's desire for power that made him to plot against his own brother. It is Sebastine's yearning that makes him plot against the king, his own brother. In fact, it is Caliban's desire for control that makes him rebellious, and it is also Ariel's desire for freedom that makes him do the wish of his master, Prospero. Therefore, this play is about man's quest for control of circumstances in life. However, this could either promote him or in fact lead to his downfall.

### ***Treachery and betrayal***

This is a follow-up to the above-mentioned theme. With the inordinate ambition for power comes the desperation to commit a crime. This is buttressed by Antonio's and Sebastine's drive towards annihilating their brothers in order to fulfil their evil and selfish dreams. Therefore, both Prospero and Alonso experience treachery and betrayal in the course of the play through the actions of their respective brothers.

### ***Appearance can be deceptive***

It is strange the type of people that could provoke evil. Caliban is half human, half monster. Yet, he did not commit half the crime the king and the so-called nobles did to themselves. Therefore, appearances can be deceptive because it is unlikely that a brother would want to harm another. Yet, in this play, the wrongdoers are the noble characters, whose outward appearances are contrary to their evil intentions.

### ***Man's battle with supernatural forces***

This play foregrounds the fact that man is also at war with supernatural forces. It seems to state that there are forces, both seen and unseen, that are at play in the destiny of man. Ariel, the lively spirit, is the propeller of the plot and action in the play. His contributions are of immense important, especially in truncating the evil plots against King Alonso and his master, Prospero.

### ***Reconciliation and forgiveness***

This is the main message of the play. Despite the betrayal and disloyalty, there is a truce as all the parties involved reconciled their differences. In fact, the play ends as a comedy with the principal characters all experiencing different measures of relief. However, all these are made possible by the forgiving spirit of Prospero. Naturally, the result of his betrayal by his brother and the king should actually be revenge. His forgiveness prevents imminent tragic loss and irreparable kingdom.

## **Style and Dramatic Devices**

*The Tempest* is a comedy, which focuses on the travails and problems of a character, but in the end, there is a pleasant resolution. Here, the protagonist overcomes the challenges and he is finally triumphant. The play also dwells heavily on the romance, with a neo-classical tradition undertone. It further explores the themes of wandering, mystical occurrences and travails. It has a narrative appeal, alternating between the world of reality and the supernatural. This is buttressed with Ariel often disguising himself as a mythological being, as a nymph, a harpy or Ceres.

William Shakespeare employs the classical style of the unities of time, place and action. By this, the action of the play takes place within a day, actually in less than three hours. The setting is on a forsaken Island in a coastal region and the play reflects on similar life experience, with a view to teaching how life should be lived. This is seen in Miranda's humane attributes and Prospero's noble traits.

## **Use of Symbol**

**Tempest** - This is derived from the title of the play. The word 'tempest' is very suggestive. It captures a plethora of challenges and difficulties associated with man. Tempest simply means chaos, tumult, turbulence and so on. Therefore, at a figurative level of interpretation, Shakespeare's symbolic title of the play, which is accentuated in the first scene of the play, reveals the contentious existence of man, as a being who is constantly faced with serious problems. Life, indeed, is filled with challenges which man cannot escape from but certainly has the choice to face.

**Caliban** – This is one of the most controversial characters in the play. This character is a symbolic representation of subjugation. He is used to address the issue of colonization. Through the character, the playwright brings to fore the suppression of natives in colonized regions of the world by Western powers. Prospero represents the European powers which explore and eventually dominate some regions of the world, with the intention of introducing civilization to the inhabitants. This is a symbolic representation of the dehumanized treatment meted out to the native of the land.

**Books** – Book means education, and education means knowledge. Prospero's magic powers are unique representation of literacy and education. Beyond the magical appeal lies the importance of knowledge. Prospero's art in the end helps him to overcome his trials. In fact, it helps him in achieving his ultimate goal. Therefore, at a metaphorical level of representation, education is portrayed as a vital tool towards liberation.

### Summary

*The Tempest* is a creative work of art that reveals the experience of man in relation to other humans and his environment in particular. Shakespeare encapsulates the metaphor of life as both a tragic and a comic phenomenon. The characters adequately display human emotions and traits which make the play to be a vivid representation of life. No doubt, the play would continue to serve as a crucial lesson to mankind till eternity.

### Revision Questions

1. With excerpts from the play, discuss the significance and relevance of *The Tempest* to the present society.
2. *The Tempest* is a tragi-comedy. Discuss extensively.
3. Prospero is the protagonist of the play. His actions and inactions determine the fate of other characters. Write an essay on his characterization with emphasises on how he is able to change his fate.
4. The *Tempest* is saturated with the themes of love, justice, betrayal and forgiveness. Explain how Shakespeare is able to achieve this in the play.
5. Discuss the dramatic techniques used in the play.

### Objective Questions

1. The *Tempest* is written by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - (a) William Shakespear
  - (b) William Shakespeare
  - (c) Williams Shakespeare
  - (d) Willam Shakespear
2. \_\_\_\_\_ is the setting of the play.
  - (a) Milan
  - (b) Italy
  - (c) Island
  - (d) Ireland

O, I have suffered

With those that I saw suffer: a brave vessel

Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her,

Dash'd all to pieces. O, the cry did knock

Against my very heart

3. Who said this?
  - (a) Miranda
  - (b) Boatswain
  - (c) Sebastine

(d) Ferdinand

4. Who is the recipient of the message? (a) Alonso (b) Ariel (c) Prospero (d) Antonio

5. What is the dominant figurative expression in the last sentence?

(a) Assonance

(b) Apostrophe

(c) Synecdoche

(d) Personification

6. According to the play, the protector of Prospero's life is

(a) King Alonso.

(b) Ariel.

(c) Gonzalo.

(d) Caliban.

What is't? a spirit?

Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir,

It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit

7. Who is the speaker talking about? (a) Ceres (b) Ariel (c) Caliban (d) Ferdinand

8. Who is the speaker? (a) Trinculo (b) Stephano (c) Miranda (d) Sycorax

9. The central theme of the play is (a) Forgiveness. (b) Humility. (c) Betrayal. (d) Tranquility.

10. At the end, Prospero

(a) burnt his books.

(b) threw his books into the sea.

(c) buried his books.

(d) gave them to Ariel.

#### Answers to the Objective Questions

1. B 2. C 3. A 4. C 5. D 6. C 7. D 8. C 9. A 10. C