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## CRITICAL APPROACHES

## CHARACTER EVALUATION

**Critics** in different countries and at different times have offered varying evaluations of the characters in *The Tempest*. For some, Prospero is an almost godlike figure appearing magnanimous for forgiving his brother and Alonso, for freeing Ariel, and for treating Caliban well until he attempted to rape Miranda. Others, especially critics from colonised countries, describe Prospero as an oppressive invader who seeks to dominate both Caliban and Ariel. It was probably not Shakespeare's intention to alienate his audience from either the coloniser or the colonised. In his day there was a widely held belief that our place in society was divinely ordained and that a country got the ruler it deserved. Read the play carefully. Evaluate what is said and make up your own mind.

Shakespeare's characters are usually subtly drawn. Like living human beings, they are rarely completely good or completely bad, and can show different sides of their nature depending on the people they are with or the circumstances in which they find themselves. In *The Tempest*, however, it has been suggested that the main characters are at one and the same time naturalistic and representational. At one level, the four main characters on the island may be said to represent different attributes of humanity: instinct – Caliban; love – Miranda; spirit – Ariel; and power – Prospero.

But such a generalisation should be challenged and discussed rather than simply accepted. It does, however, seem true that in his last plays, *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare is more interested in dealing with human weaknesses and human destiny than in delineating highly idiosyncratic characters.

It has often been suggested that, with the exception of Miranda, all of the characters in *The Tempest* undergo a transformation as soon as they reach the island. Like many generalisations, this one needs to be examined carefully. We might ask if Prospero himself



## CHECK THE BOOK

After reading Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, you might like to compare it with Aimé Césaire's reworking of it as *A Tempest (Une tempête, d'après La tempête de Shakespeare: adaptation pour un théâtre nègre, 1969)*. Césaire's is a **symbolic** work about white domination of blacks.

experiences any change of heart. He certainly tells the audience that he has decided to treat the transgressors with mercy rather than with the revenge that he had earlier planned, and, before the final **act**, he voluntarily relinquishes his magical powers in order to take up his birthright, the dukedom of Milan. Alonso certainly changes. He feels remorse for his sin against Prospero and feels that he has been punished for it in the apparent loss of his son. Ferdinand changes in the sense that he falls in love and recognises that this love is more real than any he has previously experienced. It is highly debatable if the others change. Antonio, Sebastian, Trinculo and Stephano all succumb to temptation and are all forgiven, but it is unlikely that they have experienced any change of character.

## PROSPERO

Prospero plays the most significant role in the play in that he is on the stage longer than any other character and he controls the fate of all the others on the island. You might like to consider whether he uses his powers wisely and humanely or selfishly. His name means 'fortunate' or 'prosperous' and you might like to examine how fortunate he is in the kindness he received from Gonzalo and in his ability to win back his dukedom.

He lost his dukedom because he failed to recognise his brother's ambition and because he neglected his first duty, the governing of Milan. As he himself tells Miranda:

The government I cast upon my brother,  
And to my state grew stranger, being transported  
And rapt in secret studies. (I.2.75–7)

His treatment by his brother, Antonio, has taught him not to trust appearances. It may look as if Ferdinand loves Miranda, but Prospero is determined to test the strength of this love:

They are both in either's pow'rs: but this swift business  
I must uneasy make, lest too light winning  
Make the prize light. (I.2.453–5)

You might ask yourself if Prospero is as affectionate and caring as he suggests. For example, he tells Miranda that: 'I have done



Shakespeare often uses Italian settings and personal names in his plays, possibly because Italy was so closely linked to the Renaissance and gave a sense of the exotic to his drama. A good source of background on his knowledge and use of Italian culture can be found at <http://shakespeareauthorship.com/italy.html>

World events

- 1492** Christopher Columbus sails to America
- 1534** Henry VIII breaks with Rome and declares himself head of the Church of England
- 1556** Archbishop Thomas Cranmer burnt at the stake
- 1558** Elizabeth I accedes to throne
- 1562** The English seaman, John Hawkins, first sold Africans into slavery
- 1568** Mary Queen of Scots taken prisoner by Elizabeth I
- 1570** Elizabeth I excommunicated by Pope Pius V
- 1571** Battle of Lepanto
- 1577** Francis Drake sets out on round the world voyage
- 1582** Outbreak of the plague in London
- 1584** Walter Raleigh's sailors land in Virginia
- 1587** Execution of Mary Queen of Scots after implicated in plot to murder Elizabeth I
- 1588** The Spanish Armada defeated
- 1589** Accession of Henry IV to French throne
- 1592** Plague in London closes theatres

Shakespeare's life

(dates for plays are approximate)

- 1564** Born in Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1582** Marries Anne Hathaway
- 1583** Daughter, Susanna, is born
- 1585** Twins, Hamnet and Judith, born
- Late 1580s – early 1590s** Probably writes *Henry VI (Parts I, II, III)* and *Richard III*
- c1585–92** Moves to London
- 1592** Writes *The Comedy of Errors*
- 1593** Writes *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*
- 1594** onwards Writes exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's Men; writes *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Richard II*
- 1595** Writes *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

Literature and the arts

- 1513** Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*
- 1565–7** Arthur Golding translates Ovid's *Metamorphoses*
- 1587** Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*

World events

- 1596** Francis Drake perishes on expedition to West Indies
- 1603** Death of Queen Elizabeth I; succeeded by James VI of Scotland, who becomes James I of England
- 1605** Discovery of Guy Fawkes's plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament
- 1609** Galileo constructs first astronomical telescope
- 1610** Henry IV of France assassinated; William Harvey discovers circulation of blood; Galileo observes Saturn for the first time
- 1612** Last burning of heretics in England
- 1618** Walter Raleigh executed for treason; Thirty Years War begins

Shakespeare's life

(dates for plays are approximate)

- 1596** Hamnet dies; William granted coat of arms
- 1598** Writes *Much Ado About Nothing*
- 1599** Buys share in the Globe Theatre; writes *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*
- 1600** *The Merchant of Venice* printed
- 1600–1** Writes *Hamlet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
- 1601** Writes *Troilus and Cressida*
- 1602** Writes *All's Well That Ends Well*
- 1603** onwards His company enjoys patronage of James I as the King's Men
- 1604** *Othello* performed; writes *Measure for Measure*
- 1605** First version of *King Lear*
- 1606** Writes *Macbeth*
- 1606–7** Probably writes *Antony and Cleopatra*
- 1607** Writes *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*
- 1608** Writes *Pericles*; the King's Men acquire Blackfriars Theatre for winter performances
- 1609** Becomes part-owner of the new Blackfriars Theatre
- 1611** *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* performed
- 1613** The Globe Theatre burns down
- 1616** Dies

Literature and the arts

- 1598** Christopher Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*
- 1603** Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, 'Of Cannibals', translated by John Florio
- 1605** Cervantes, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*
- 1610** Pamphlet published entitled *A Discovery of the Bermudas, otherwise called the Ile of Divels*
- 1622** Birth of French dramatist Molière