



PROSPERO

PROSPERO'S ROLE IN THE PLAY

Prospero was the Duke of Milan until his brother Antonio overthrew him and cast him and his daughter adrift at sea. During the play:

- he is a dutiful and loving father to Miranda who was banished with him.
- he commands Ariel and other spirits to perform magical tasks according to his wishes.
- he keeps Caliban as his slave on the island.
- he creates the storm that causes Alonso and his companions to reach the island.
- he arranges the meeting of Ferdinand and Miranda who fall in love.
- he eventually reunites King Alonso of Naples with Ferdinand, his son and heir.
- he forgives those who wronged him and renounces his magic powers before returning to Milan.

PROSPERO'S IMPORTANCE TO THE PLAY AS A WHOLE

Prospero's ambition to return home with his daughter and claim their birthright provides the play with its central story. Prospero's powers are so extensive that, much like an author, he influences everything that occurs in *The Tempest* from the storm at the beginning to granting Ariel his freedom at the end.

AIMING HIGH: MAGIC AND ALCHEMY

The very best answers will make interesting connections between characters, themes and relevant contextual information. In *The Tempest*, Prospero refers in a variety of ways to his plan to be reinstated as the Duke of Milan and at the beginning of Act V Scene 1 he says 'Now does my project gather to a head' (line 1). He is associated from the beginning of the play with a love of books and study, and it is clear from the first scene in which he appears that he possesses magic powers. Many aspects of Prospero's behaviour and appearance would have put Shakespeare's audiences in mind of alchemy – a medieval philosophy concerned with transforming base metals into gold and discovering the elixir of life.

Alchemists were sometimes accused of dabbling in witchcraft and occultism. Shakespeare takes care to portray Prospero as a very different kind of practitioner to the 'damned witch Sycorax' (I.2.263). Furthermore, having recovered his earthly powers he relinquishes his magic, thereby demonstrating that he is motivated by justice rather than by greed. Ironically, Prospero's books are both the cause of his downfall and the means by which he takes back control.

KEY CONTEXT A03

Famous alchemists included the Swiss physician Paracelsus (1493–1541) and the English mathematician and astrologer John Dee (1527–1608) who was also known for having the largest private library in England at that time.

EXAM FOCUS: WRITING ABOUT PROSPERO

A01



Key point	Evidence/Further meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prospero is a bookish and learned man with an interest in the 'liberal arts' (I.2.73). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He became so absorbed in his 'secret studies' (I.2.77) that his brother Antonio was able to become more involved in governing Milan and to eventually plot his overthrow.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He is an attentive father to Miranda and takes great care that she receives an excellent education on the island. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He insists that Miranda was not a 'trouble' (I.2.51) to him but 'a cherubin ... that did preserve me' (lines 152–3). • He refers to himself as Miranda's 'schoolmaster' (line 172) and says he has 'made thee more profit/Than other princes can' (lines 172–3).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He can be stern and severe in his dealings with others. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Act I Scene 2 he calls Ariel 'moody' (line 244) and 'malignant' (line 257) and calls Caliban 'malice' (line 367) and 'poisonous slave' (line 319). • Miranda says that Prospero is 'of a better nature ... Than he appears by speech' (I.2.496–7). However Ferdinand believes him to be 'composed of harshness' (III.1.9).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ultimately he shows forgiveness to those who conspired against him. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In Act V Scene 1, he says that 'The rarer action is/In virtue than in vengeance' (lines 27–8) before instructing Ariel to release the wrongdoers and bring them to him.

REVISION FOCUS: WRITING ABOUT PROSPERO



Throughout the play, Prospero's powers are in evidence even when he is not. Make notes on Prospero's hidden role in the play's nine scenes. In which scenes does he affect events without appearing at all? In which scenes is he unseen and unheard by the other characters on stage with him? How does this affect and shape the audience's response to him as the play progresses?

TOP TIP A02

In Latin, the word *prospero* means 'favourable' or 'prospering', suggesting that the fortunes of Shakespeare's central character will improve over the course of the play.

KEY CONTEXT A03

In the 2010 film version of *The Tempest* Helen Mirren is cast in the play's central role and is renamed Prospera. What effect might this have on the story?



RESPONDING TO WRITERS' EFFECTS

The two most important assessment objectives are **AO1** and **AO2**. They are about *what* writers do (the choices they make, and the effects these create), *what* your ideas are (your analysis and interpretation) and *how* you write about them (how well you explain your ideas).

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVE 1

AO1

What does it say?	What does it mean?	Dos and Don'ts
Read, understand and respond to texts. Students should be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. ● Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations. 	You must: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use some of the literary terms you have learned (correctly!). ● Write in a professional way (not a sloppy, chatty way). ● Show that you have thought for yourself. ● Back up your ideas with examples. 	Don't write: <i>Antonio is a very unkind brother who went behind his brother's back to become duke.</i> Do write: <i>Shakespeare presents Antonio as a ruthless and 'false' character, both in Prospero's account of how he was undermined and then 'hurried ... aboard a barque' with his daughter in Act I Scene 2 and in the scenes in which Antonio himself appears.</i>

IMPROVING YOUR CRITICAL STYLE

Use a variety of words and phrases to show effects:

Shakespeare suggests ..., conveys ..., implies ..., presents how ..., explores ..., demonstrates ..., describes how ..., shows how ...

I/we (as readers) infer ..., recognise ..., understand ..., question ..., see ..., are given ..., reflect ...

For example, look at these two alternative paragraphs by different students about Gonzalo. Note the difference in the quality of expression.

Student A:

Would make more sense to refer to the author

The play makes Gonzalo a bit of a bore in lots of ways. He talks a lot and Antonio and Sebastian send him up but there is another side to the story when he sticks up for himself. He talks a lot but he says some meaningful things like 'You rub the sore/ When you should bring the plaster'.

Too colloquial

Vague – specific evidence needed

Repetitive – better to use an alternative

Student B:

Fits with the idea of the overall way Gonzalo is shown

Shakespeare portrays Gonzalo as a talkative and perhaps overly attentive figure when he tries to comfort Alonso in Act II Scene I. However we also acknowledge his humanity and intelligence as he speaks sympathetically to the king and at length about his ideal society. His use of words like 'innocent', 'abundance' and 'perfection' convey not only his utopian ideals but also his positive view of the human race.

Clear and precise language

Good variety of vocabulary

Clear and precise language

Looks beyond the obvious and infers meaning with personal interpretation

ASSESSMENT OBJECTIVE 2

AO2

What does it say?	What does it mean?	Dos and Don'ts
Analyse the language, form and structure used by the writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	'Analyse' – comment in detail on particular aspects of the text or language. 'Language' – vocabulary, imagery, sound effects, rhythm and metre, etc. 'Form' – how the story is told (e.g. comedy or romance, five-act play, inclusion of a masque). 'Structure' – the order in which events are revealed, or in which characters appear, or descriptions are presented. 'Create meaning' – what can we, as readers, infer from what the writer tells us? What is implied by particular descriptions, or events? 'Subject terminology' – words you should use when writing about plays, such as 'audience', 'drama', 'act', 'scene', 'stage direction', etc.	Don't write: <i>The language helps the reader to understand that the island is a magical place.</i> Do write: <i>In this speech, Caliban's lyrical language has a peaceful and musical quality. Shakespeare uses onomatopoeia to convey the sounds of the 'twangling instruments'. The repetition of 'sleep'/'sleeping' gives a sense of being in a state halfway between sleeping and waking, trying to return to a beautiful dream.</i>

IMPLICATIONS, INFERENCES AND INTERPRETATIONS

- The best analysis focuses on specific ideas or events, or uses of language and thinks about what is **implied**.
- This means drawing **inferences**. From the beginning, Miranda is shown to be a kind and intelligent woman but what deeper ideas are signified in her language and in the language used about her?
- From the inferences you make across the text as a whole, you can arrive at your own **interpretation** – a sense of the bigger picture, a wider evaluation of a character, relationship or idea.