

The Tempest

William Shakespeare's play, the TEMPEST, makes an attempt to envelop the reader in the intangible world of art. It is not enough in this play to simply watch one art work emerge Shakespeare's own but we somehow see art in greater depth as Prospero himself creates another art work within the play and even another small play within his own. It is possible to consider Prospero as a sort of Wizard of Oz who manipulates situations and observes results. If this is true, then one can consider the play as Prospero's own artifact and thus trace his development as an artist in the progression of the play itself. In this light, you can see the thesis of the paper emerge: the TEMPEST is a sort of synthesis or descriptive definition of the creative process or character of the artist. This topic can be approached from the standpoint of pure character analysis only. However, so many elements in the play demand recognition in the proposed context that it seems necessary to keep Prospero and his art clearly delineated while actually inseparable.

The tempest offers a wild beginning for Prospero's work. The characters are at odds, the natural elements are in chaos - in fact, the entire situation lacks control of any kind. The reader later discovers that Prospero alone has mastery of the seemingly chaotic situation and possesses the skill to "command these elements to silence, and work the peace of the present."

In the realm of his own creation, it is not a position which guarantees success, but the ability to confront the present moment or inspiration and to bring it to fulfillment. The importance of the present (the now-time finds constant reiteration in the play. It is the Boatswain who first exemplifies the need for direct confrontation with the elements. Prospero, too, reveals a special sensitivity to the present. It is almost as though he senses that the "fullness of time has come and he must bring all his powers to bear on the object at hand. He experiences the imminence of the time which could make of him a true artist. In his conversations with Miranda, he refers to the concept of time frequently. Eventually he is able to clearly state his realization that he must act on the possibilities which are open to him now. In short, Prospero's awareness that he must be open to the opportunities which are to come to him, is an important beginning in his development as an artist.

A return to the tempest scene should reveal more themes regarding art which will continue to advance the action. A tension in the physical situation itself parallels another tension on the artistic level. In this melange, the surge of emotion and the need for tranquillity clash. The devastating power of passion becomes clear in the action of the King's men, especially Antonio and Sebastian. They have no patience and demand immediate measures to be taken without due consideration. Throughout the play, these men work against the simple vision which finds good in all things. As such, they represent the antithesis of art. Their role is to bring about confusion where there is a need for the unity which art can provide. Enough said.

In contrast to these “actionists”, the Boatswain echoes a plea which is reiterated often: “Silence!” Silence provides an atmosphere conducive to the expression of great thoughts. As well as being the absence of external noise, it presupposes an interior order capable of reaching out to chaos and unifying it. Prospero needs to achieve this kind of silence if he is to grow as an artist. Back in Milan when he lived solely for concentrated intellectual studies, Prospero promoted disorder within his kingdom. He no doubt lived in a silent world, that of the pseudoscholar, but his silence was not genuine. Living on a primitive island for twelve years, Prospero has done nothing but indulge his whims in “rough magic.” He has done much, but none of his activities been able to effect order where it was most needed. To achieve integrity, Prospero must somehow merge the active and contemplative sides of his nature.

The end of the tempest scene, too, as well as its characters, has went to a further bearing on the beginning of the creative process. As the scene fades, the total impression is one of seeming disintegration and chaos. The characters scatter, losing contact with each other. The resulting suspense gives a feeling of incompleteness, but as the next scene opens, the controlling factor of the tempest is revealed. Prospero, then, enters into the crisis of his life as a man and as an artist by creating a tempest. It is only the beginning, but the preliminary requisites for art are present in it to be worked out in the remainder of Shakespeare's play and in Prospero's own artistic development.