Themes

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

The Illusion of Justice

*The Tempest* tells a fairly straightforward story involving an unjust act, the usurpation of Prospero's throne by his brother, and Prospero’s quest to re-establish justice by restoring himself to power. However, the idea of justice that the play works toward seems highly subjective, since this idea represents the view of one character who controls the fate of all the other characters. Though Prospero presents himself as a victim of injustice working to right the wrongs that have been done to him, Prospero’s idea of justice and injustice is somewhat hypocritical—though he is furious with his brother for taking his power, he has no qualms about enslaving Ariel and Caliban in order to achieve his ends. At many moments throughout the play, Prospero’s sense of justice seems extremely one-sided and mainly involves what is good for Prospero. Moreover, because the play offers no notion of higher order or justice to supersede Prospero’s interpretation of events, the play is morally ambiguous.

As the play progresses, however, it becomes more and more involved with the idea of creativity and art, and Prospero’s role begins to mirror more explicitly the role of an author creating a story around him. With this metaphor in mind, and especially if we accept Prospero as a surrogate for Shakespeare himself, Prospero’s sense of justice begins to seem, if not perfect, at least sympathetic. Moreover, the means he uses to achieve his idea of justice mirror the machinations of the artist, who also seeks to enable others to see his view of the world. Playwrights arrange their stories in such a way that their own idea of justice is imposed upon events. In *The Tempest*, the author is *in* the play, and the fact that he establishes his idea of justice and creates a happy ending for all the characters becomes a cause for celebration, not criticism.
By using magic and tricks that echo the special effects and spectacles of the theater, Prospero gradually persuades the other characters and the audience of the rightness of his case. As he does so, the ambiguities surrounding his methods slowly resolve themselves. Prospero forgives his enemies, releases his slaves, and relinquishes his magic power, so that, at the end of the play, he is only an old man whose work has been responsible for all the audience's pleasure. The establishment of Prospero's idea of justice becomes less a commentary on justice in life than on the nature of morality in art. Happy endings are possible, Shakespeare seems to say, because the creativity of artists can create them, even if the moral values that establish the happy ending originate from nowhere but the imagination of the artist.

The Difficulty of Distinguishing “Men” from “Monsters”
Upon seeing Ferdinand for the first time, Miranda says that he is “the third man that e’er I saw” (I.ii.449). The other two are, presumably, Prospero and Caliban. In their first conversation with Caliban, however, Miranda and Prospero say very little that shows they consider him to be human. Miranda reminds Caliban that before she taught him language, he gabbled “like / A thing most brutish” (I.ii.359–360) and Prospero says that he gave Caliban “human care” (I.ii.349), implying that this was something Caliban ultimately did not deserve. Caliban’s exact nature continues to be slightly ambiguous later. In Act IV, scene i, reminded of Caliban’s plot, Prospero refers to him as a “devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick” (IV.i.188–189). Miranda and Prospero both have contradictory views of Caliban’s humanity. On the one hand, they think that their education of him has lifted him from his formerly brutish status. On the other hand, they seem to see him as inherently brutish. His devilish nature can never be overcome by nurture, according to Prospero. Miranda expresses a similar sentiment in Act I, scene ii: “thy vile race, / Though thou didst learn, had that in’t which good natures
"Could not abide to be with" (I.ii.361–363). The inhuman part of Caliban drives out the human part, the "good nature," that is imposed on him. Caliban claims that he was kind to Prospero, and that Prospero repaid that kindness by imprisoning him (see I.ii.347). In contrast, Prospero claims that he stopped being kind to Caliban once Caliban had tried to rape Miranda (I.ii.347–351). Which character the audience decides to believe depends on whether it views Caliban as inherently brutish, or as made brutish by oppression. The play leaves the matter ambiguous. Caliban balances all of his eloquent speeches, such as his curses in Act I, scene ii and his speech about the isle’s "noises" in Act III, scene ii, with the most degrading kind of drunken, servile behaviour. But Trinculo’s speech upon first seeing Caliban (II.ii.18–38), the longest speech in the play, reproaches too harsh a view of Caliban and blurs the distinction between men and monsters. In England, which he visited once, Trinculo says, Caliban could be shown off for money: “There would this monster make a man. Any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian” (II.ii.28–31). What seems most monstrous in these sentences is not the “dead Indian,” or “any strange beast,” but the cruel voyeurism of those who capture and gape at them.

The Allure of Ruling a Colony
The nearly uninhabited island presents the sense of infinite possibility to almost everyone who lands there. Prospero has found it, in its isolation, an ideal place to school his daughter. Sycorax, Caliban’s mother, worked her magic there after she was exiled from Algeria. Caliban, once alone on the island, now Prospero’s slave, laments that he had been his own king (I.ii.344–345). As he attempts to comfort Alonso, Gonzalo imagines a utopian society on the island, over which he would rule (II.i.148–156). In Act III, scene ii, Caliban suggests that Stephano kill Prospero, and Stephano immediately envisions his own reign: “Monster, I will kill this man. His daughter and I will be King and Queen—save our graces!—and Trinculo and thyself shall be my viceroys” (III.ii.101–103). Stephano particularly looks forward to taking advantage of the spirits that make
“noises” on the isle; they will provide music for his kingdom for free. All these characters envision the island as a space of freedom and unrealized potential.

The tone of the play, however, toward the hopes of the would-be colonizers is vexed at best. Gonzalo’s utopian vision in Act II, scene i is undercut by a sharp retort from the usually foolish Sebastian and Antonio. When Gonzalo says that there would be no commerce or work or “sovereignty” in his society, Sebastian replies, “yet he would be king on’t,” and Antonio adds, “The latter end of his commonwealth forgets the beginning” (II.i.156–157). Gonzalo’s fantasy thus involves him ruling the island while seeming not to rule it, and in this he becomes a kind of parody of Prospero. While there are many representatives of the colonial impulse in the play, the colonized have only one representative: Caliban. We might develop sympathy for him at first, when Prospero seeks him out merely to abuse him, and when we see him tormented by spirits. However, this sympathy is made more difficult by his willingness to abase himself before Stephano in Act II, scene ii. Even as Caliban plots to kill one colonial master (Prospero) in Act III, scene ii, he sets up another (Stephano). The urge to rule and the urge to be ruled seem inextricably intertwined.

**Prospero’s threats**

Prospero issues many threats in *The Tempest*, demonstrating his innate violence and cruelty. For the most part, Prospero directs his threats at his servants. Prospero’s threats typically contain elements of magic, as when he reprimands Caliban for his disobedience: “If thou neglect’st or dost unwillingly / What I command, I’ll rack thee with old cramps, / Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar” (I.ii.). Prospero also makes harsh threats against his more helpful servant, Ariel. Prospero has promised to liberate Ariel after a period of faithful service, and when Ariel reminds his master of this promise, Prospero warns: “If thou more murmur’st, I will rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails” (I.ii.). Curiously, the tree prison Prospero describes here echoes the tree prison the witch Sycorax had placed Ariel in prior to Prospero’s arrival. Thus, not only do
Prospero’s threats indicate his cruel and domineering nature, but they also link him to other tyrannical figures.

**Obedience and disobedience**

The themes of obedience and disobedience underscore the island’s hierarchy of power. Prospero stands at the top of this hierarchy. As both the former Duke of Milan and a gifted student of magic, Prospero is the most powerful figure on the island. He therefore demands obedience from all of his subjects, including his servants and his daughter. At some point, however, each of these subjects disobeys him. Caliban swears his allegiance to Stephano, trading one master for another in an attempt to topple the island’s hierarchy altogether. Other examples of disobedience in the play are more nuanced. Miranda, for instance, believes she disobeys her father by pursuing romance with Ferdinand. But her actions are actually in line with her father’s wishes, since Prospero’s harsh treatment of Ferdinand is designed to make Miranda take pity on him and fall in love with him. The situation is again different in Ariel’s case. Ariel has proven himself a faithful servant, yet Prospero considers him disobedient when he asks for his freedom. These complexities ultimately suggest that the island’s hierarchy of power is less stable than it appears.

**Treason**

Shakespeare weaves the theme of treason throughout *The Tempest*. The first instance of treason occurred in the play’s prehistory, when Antonio conspired with King Alonso to assassinate Prospero and succeed him as the new Duke of Milan. The attempt to kill Prospero was both political treason and brotherly betrayal. The theme of treason returns in the form of twin assassination plots that arise during the play. While Caliban and Stephano plot to kill Prospero and take control of the island, Antonio and Sebastian plot to kill Alonso and take control of Naples. Both of these plots get interrupted, so despite these men’s treasonous intentions, they ultimately do no real harm. Yet the interruption of these assassination plots does not fully dismantle the theme of treason. Perhaps
indicating future strife, the play’s final scene features Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess—a game that can only be won with the metaphorical assassination of the opponent’s king. When Miranda accuses Ferdinand of cheating, she recalls how her uncle Antonio cheated his way into power twelve years prior. Does the future hold yet more instances of treason?

**Wonder/admiration**

The themes of wonder and admiration center on Miranda, whose name means both “wonderful” and “admirable” in Latin. In a play so full of negative feelings about past wrongdoings, Miranda’s optimism about the future serves as a beacon of hope. Ferdinand senses Miranda’s admirable qualities upon first meeting her, exclaiming, “O you wonder!” (I.ii.). In a later scene he proclaims her superior virtues: “O you, / So perfect and so peerless, are created / Of every creature’s best!” (III.i.). Aside from Gonzalo, Miranda most clearly symbolizes optimism about the possibility of new beginnings and a better future: what she herself calls a “brave new world.” In spite of Miranda’s optimism, wonder sometimes carries a less positive connotation in *The Tempest*. Under Prospero’s command and Ariel’s magic, the island is itself a place of wonderful occurrences meant to confuse and disorient. At one point in Act V Prospero comments that Alonso and his company have had many wonderful visions, and that these visions prevent them from thinking clearly. In this sense, the island’s wonderful occurrences conceal truth for the purpose of manipulation.

**Monstrosity**

The theme of monstrosity constitutes the flip-side to the themes of wonder and admiration. Whereas wonder and admiration apply mainly to the beautiful and loving Miranda, monstrosity applies mainly to the ugly and hateful Caliban. The word “monster” appears most frequently in the scenes with Stephano and Trinculo. Upon first laying eyes on Caliban, Trinculo identifies him as a fishy-looking freak, and he imagines exploiting Caliban’s monstrous appearance for profit on the streets of a city: “holiday
“fools” would willingly part with “a piece of silver” to witness the sideshow attraction. Caliban’s monstrosity derives not from his appearance alone, but from the contrast between his savage appearance and his civilized language. At one point Trinculo expresses surprise that a creature like Caliban should use a term of respect like “Lord.” Although Caliban stands as the primary example of monstrosity in *The Tempest*, Alonso also uses the word “monstrous” to refer to illusory sounds and visions produced by Ariel.

Motifs

*Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes*

Masters and Servants

Nearly every scene in the play either explicitly or implicitly portrays a relationship between a figure that possesses power and a figure that is subject to that power. The play explores the master-servant dynamic most harshly in cases in which the harmony of the relationship is threatened or disrupted, as by the rebellion of a servant or the ineptitude of a master. For instance, in the opening scene, the “servant” (the Boatswain) is dismissive and angry toward his “masters” (the noblemen), whose ineptitude threatens to lead to a shipwreck in the storm. From then on, master-servant relationships like these dominate the play: Prospero and Caliban; Prospero and Ariel; Alonso and his nobles; the nobles and Gonzalo; Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban; and so forth. The play explores the psychological and social dynamics of power relationships from a number of contrasting angles, such as the generally positive relationship between Prospero and Ariel, the generally negative relationship between Prospero and Caliban, and the treachery in Alonso’s relationship to his nobles.
Water and Drowning

The play is awash with references to water. The Mariners enter “wet” in Act I, scene i, and Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo enter “all wet,” after being led by Ariel into a swampy lake (IV.i.193). Miranda’s fear for the lives of the sailors in the “wild waters” (I.ii.2) causes her to weep. Alonso, believing his son dead because of his own actions against Prospero, decides in Act III, scene iii to drown himself. His language is echoed by Prospero in Act V, scene i when the magician promises that, once he has reconciled with his enemies, “deeper than did ever plummet sound / I’ll drown my book” (V.i.56–57).

These are only a few of the references to water in the play. Occasionally, the references to water are used to compare characters. For example, the echo of Alonso’s desire to drown himself in Prospero’s promise to drown his book calls attention to the similarity of the sacrifices each man must make. Alonso must be willing to give up his life in order to become truly penitent and to be forgiven for his treachery against Prospero. Similarly, in order to rejoin the world he has been driven from, Prospero must be willing to give up his magic and his power.

Perhaps the most important overall effect of this water motif is to heighten the symbolic importance of the tempest itself. It is as though the water from that storm runs through the language and action of the entire play—just as the tempest itself literally and crucially affects the lives and actions of all the characters.

Mysterious Noises

The isle is indeed, as Caliban says, “full of noises” (III.ii.130). The play begins with a “tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning” (I.i.1, stage direction), and the splitting of the ship is signaled in part by “a confused noise within” (I.i.54, stage direction). Much of the noise of the play is musical, and much of the music is Ariel’s. Ferdinand is led to Miranda by Ariel’s music. Ariel’s music also wakes Gonzalo just as Antonio and Sebastian are about to kill Alonso in Act II, scene i. Moreover, the magical banquet of
Act III, scene iii is laid out to the tune of “Solemn and strange music” (III.iii.18, stage direction), and Juno and Ceres sing in the wedding masque (IV.i.106–117). The noises, sounds, and music of the play are made most significant by Caliban’s speech about the noises of the island at III.ii.130–138. Shakespeare shows Caliban in the thrall of magic, which the theater audience also experiences as the illusion of thunder, rain, invisibility. The action of The Tempest is very simple. What gives the play most of its hypnotic, magical atmosphere is the series of dreamlike events it stages, such as the tempest, the magical banquet, and the wedding masque. Accompanied by music, these present a feast for the eye and the ear and convince us of the magical glory of Prospero’s enchanted isle.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, and colours used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

The Tempest

The tempest that begins the play, and which puts all of Prospero’s enemies at his disposal, symbolizes the suffering Prospero endured, and which he wants to inflict on others. All of those shipwrecked are put at the mercy of the sea, just as Prospero and his infant daughter were twelve years ago, when some loyal friends helped them out to sea in a ragged little boat (see I.ii.144–151). Prospero must make his enemies suffer as he has suffered so that they will learn from their suffering, as he has from his. The tempest is also a symbol of Prospero’s magic, and of the frightening, potentially malevolent side of his power.

The Game of Chess

The object of chess is to capture the king. That, at the simplest level, is the symbolic significance of Prospero revealing Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess in the final
scene. Prospero has caught the king—Alonso—and reprimanded him for his treachery. In doing so, Prospero has married Alonso’s son to his own daughter without the king’s knowledge, a deft political manoeuvre that assures Alonso’s support because Alonso will have no interest in upsetting a dukedom to which his own son is heir. This is the final move in Prospero’s plot, which began with the tempest. He has maneuverer the different passengers of Alonso’s ship around the island with the skill of a great chess player.

Caught up in their game, Miranda and Ferdinand also symbolize something ominous about Prospero’s power. They do not even notice the others staring at them for a few lines. “Sweet lord, you play me false,” Miranda says, and Ferdinand assures her that he “would not for the world” do so (V.i.174–176). The theatrical tableau is almost too perfect: Ferdinand and Miranda, suddenly and unexpectedly revealed behind a curtain, playing chess and talking gently of love and faith, seem entirely removed from the world around them. Though he has promised to relinquish his magic, Prospero still seems to see his daughter as a mere pawn in his game.

**Prospero’s Books**

Like the tempest, Prospero’s books are a symbol of his power. “Remember / First to possess his books,” Caliban says to Stephano and Trinculo, “for without them / He’s but a sot” (III.ii.86–88). The books are also, however, a symbol of Prospero’s dangerous desire to withdraw entirely from the world. It was his devotion to study that put him at the mercy of his ambitious brother, and it is this same devotion to study that has made him content to raise Miranda in isolation. Yet, Miranda’s isolation has made her ignorant of where she came from (see I.ii.33–36), and Prospero’s own isolation provides him with little company. In order to return to the world where his knowledge means something more than power, Prospero must let go of his magic.
Plot Analysis

Main Ideas

Prospero’s desire to return home to Italy and reclaim his position as the rightful Duke of Milan drives the plot of The Tempest. However, we don’t know about Prospero’s history until the second scene of the play. Instead, the play begins by hurtling the audience straight into the action. The first scene opens on a ship in the midst of a storm. By opening with the chaos of the tempest, Shakespeare has drawn on the literary technique of “in medias res,” which involves starting a narrative “in the midst of things” and hence without preamble. In doing so, Shakespeare places the audience in the same position as the shipwrecked crew, confused and disoriented on a strange island. The audience doesn’t meet Prospero until the second scene, when we learn that he conjured the storm. Knowing that his enemies were aboard a passing ship, Prospero used his training in sorcery to fashion a tempest and cause the ship to wreck on the island. The storm therefore constitutes the inciting incident of the play, setting events into action.

In the second scene we also learn about the circumstances that landed Prospero on the island and made him cause the storm. Prospero was the Duke of Milan until his brother, Antonio, conspired with Alonso, the King of Naples, to assassinate Prospero and seize control of Milan. Prospero managed to escape alive with help from his loyal councilor Gonzalo. These events occurred twelve years prior to the events of the play itself. This means that by the time the play begins, Prospero has already spent a long time seething with rage on the island, where he lives alone with his daughter Miranda and his slave Caliban. Prospero recounts this backstory to Miranda in Act I, Scene 2. In order to realize his desire to return to Italy and reclaim his position, Prospero needs to resolve the conflict with his brother Antonio. These themes of separation and reunion will define the action of the play, as characters are torn apart from each other before being happily reunited at the end.
The wreck that Prospero has orchestrated separates the ship’s crew into three groups: Ferdinand gets stranded by himself and soon encounters Prospero and Miranda; Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, and Gonzalo wind up on another part of the island; and Trinculo and Stephano wash up together on yet another shore. By separating these groups, Prospero forces them live through an experience not unlike his own. Just as Prospero has been cut off from his home and loved ones, the shipwrecked crew wanders around cut off from one another, believing that their missing companions have perished in the squall. The separation causes a great deal of sorrow and confusion, and Prospero uses his command of the island’s spirits—and Ariel in particular—to confuse and disorient his enemies further. However, as the play continues, Prospero’s designs grow clearer. After making his enemies suffer, he eventually employs Ariel to guide each group toward his camp, where reunion and reconciliation can at last take place.

Prospero’s manipulations enable the play’s climax, in which he confronts his enemies. When Alonso and his company arrive at his camp, Prospero confronts Alonso and Antonio over their past betrayal when they tried to assassinate him. Prospero also continues with his emotional manipulation, claiming that he has lost his daughter in the tempest. Alonso, who is mourning his son Ferdinand, who he still believes died in the tempest, feels deeply for Prospero’s loss, and in the process forges an emotional bond with the man he wronged so many years ago. After Alonso restores Prospero’s dukedom, Prospero performs his greatest trick of all, pulling back the curtain to reveal Ferdinand, alive. Alonso is overcome with happiness, and the play that began in the midst of chaos ends with an atmosphere of serenity and joy. By forcing his enemies through an experience of separation and reunion, Prospero has resolved the play’s central conflict and ensured his own return home, thereby bringing everything in the play full circle.
Although *The Tempest* features many characters with their own plots and desires, Prospero is the main protagonist. Prospero sets the events of the play in motion by conjuring the terrible tempest that shipwrecks his enemies. The violence of the tempest indicates the magnitude of Prospero’s rage. After setting things in motion with the tempest, Prospero goes on to orchestrate all of the characters’ movements throughout the rest of the play. He starts by instructing his servant Ariel to place the castaways on three different parts of the island. Also with Ariel’s help, Prospero disorients the different groups of men, making them feel lost and helpless. He keeps up his manipulations of the island’s new inhabitants until the final act of the play, when he leads them all to the same place for the final scene of confrontation and reconciliation. The control he exerts over all other characters makes Prospero something even more than the play’s protagonist; he’s also a master manipulator, much like a puppeteer.

Prospero’s desire for revenge drives his manipulation of others. He manipulates the stranded characters in numerous ways. In separating the castaways Prospero makes each group believe the others have perished. This mistaken belief makes several plot points possible. Ferdinand, who believes he alone survived, is ready to pledge himself to Prospero and fall in love with Miranda. Alonso, who believes his son has died, loses all hope, which inspires Antonio and Sebastian to plot his assassination. Prospero also subtly manipulates Miranda into falling in love with Ferdinand as a part of his grand plan to resolve his conflict with Alonso. He hopes the union of their children will help heal the wound between them. What Prospero wants more than anything else is reconciliation. And reconciliation is precisely what he gets in the final act. With peaceful relations restored with Alonso and his men, Prospero gives up on magic and prepares for his return to power in Milan. The play, which begins with a violent tempest and concludes with calm celebration, parallels the trajectory of Prospero’s character arc. Whereas he
starts off seething with rage and vengefulness, he eventually calms down and sets the stage for emotional appeasement.

The Tempest has a large cast of antagonists, all of whom pose challenges for the play’s protagonist, Prospero. The most important antagonists are Alonso and Antonio, who conspired to assassinate Prospero when he was Duke of Milan, and who are responsible for his exile on the island. Although Alonso wronged Prospero in the past, his actions during the play are not particularly antagonizing. Instead, he spends most of the play mourning the death of his son. Antonio’s case proves a bit more complicated, since in Act II he conspires with Sebastian to assassinate Alonso, echoing his betrayal of Prospero twelve years prior. Prospero confronts both men in Act V, and Alonso immediately confesses his guilt and expresses his shame. Antonio, by contrast, doesn’t have any lines in the final act. Prospero ultimately forgives Antonio, and closes the matter by demanding his dukedom back.

The Tempest also features an array of lesser antagonists. Caliban sees Prospero as a violent imperialist who unjustly took control of the island, which had previously belonged to him and his mother, Sycorax. Caliban acts most insubordinate when he befriends two lesser antagonists, the drunkards Stephano and Trinculo, with whom he plots the murder and overthrow of Prospero. Of course, Caliban and his associates don’t stand a chance against Prospero’s magic, and their plot fails spectacularly. At the end of the play, Caliban remains fundamentally unchanged as a character—still as hateful toward Prospero as ever. Compared to Caliban, Prospero’s other servant, Ariel, seems like an angel. Yet Ariel also incites Prospero’s wrath when he reminds his master of his promise to free Ariel after a year of faithful service. Although Ariel’s character doesn’t change much in the play, he does gain his freedom in the end.
Setting

The majority of the action in *The Tempest* takes place on a small, remote island. The island provides a convenient container for the action of the play, a confined space where Prospero can easily observe and influence the actions of his enemies. The island’s isolation allows Shakespeare to concentrate the storytelling and abide by the classical “unities” of drama first set forth by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. The two unities most relevant to this play include the unity of action, which says a play should take place in a single geographical location, and the unity of time, which says the action of a play should span no more that 24 hours. Aside from the play’s first scene, which takes place on a ship, the action of *The Tempest* remains restricted to the island, and it covers about as much time as it takes to perform the play. The setting therefore helps give the play a more classical form than Shakespeare’s other romances.

In addition to confining the action of the play, the island is also a site of magic and illusion. With the magician Prospero in charge of Ariel and his fellow spirits, strange things happen on the island constantly, and these things tend to inspire confusion, sadness, and horror more often than amazement. In Act I, scene ii, Ariel conceals himself as he sings a song to Ferdinand. At first Ferdinand feels confused about where the song is coming from, but his confusion turns to sadness as he registers that the song concerns the death of his father, Alonso, in the tempest. Another disorienting vision appears in Act III, scene iii, when spirits create the illusion of a splendid banquet for Alonso and his company. But the enticing vision quickly turns horrifying when Ariel appears in the form of a harpy to chastise the men. Ultimately, the illusions that populate the island serve to confuse and manipulate. Although they do no physical harm, they break individuals down psychologically.

Despite the importance of the play’s island setting, the precise location of the island remains a mystery. The unknown location of *The Tempest* has long been a source of debate among Shakespeare scholars. One theory posits that the island is located
somewhere in the Caribbean. Scholars in this camp see *The Tempest* as a “New World” play, linked to the colonization of the Americas that was taking place at the time Shakespeare wrote the play. Another theory posits that the island would more likely be located in the Mediterranean, probably off the coast of Tunis. Scholars in this camp see *The Tempest* as an “Old World” play, linked to the shifting politics and maritime powers of the Mediterranean, which in Shakespeare’s time remained a region charged with tension between Christianity and Islam. British scholar Gordon McMullan proposes a compromise between these two theories, suggesting that *The Tempest* is geographically hybrid, “[set] in the Mediterranean and in the Caribbean and yet in neither, exactly.”

**Genre**

**Comedy, Romance**

**Comedy**

When the First Folio edition of Shakespeare’s plays was published in 1623, *The Tempest* appeared under the genre category “comedy.” Like all of Shakespeare’s other comedies, the play resolves happily, with the promise of a wedding between Miranda and Ferdinand. Also as in other comedies, the plot of *The Tempest* revolves around a series of misunderstandings that are resolved over the course of the play. The tempest, or storm, that gives the play its title causes a shipwreck, stranding many characters on an island. Several of the characters mistakenly believe their shipmates are dead. However, none of the characters actually die in the storm, and everyone is happily reunited at the play’s end. *The Tempest* also features not one but two attempted assassinations: Alonso and Antonio’s attempted assassination of Prospero, which lead to Prospero fleeing to the island, and Antonio and Sebastian’s plot to murder Alonso. But, again, neither attempt is successful, and no one dies. The play ends with Alonso
repenting of his schemes against Prospero, and Prospero reclaiming his title of Duke of Milan. The fact that no one dies in the play, discord is repaired, misunderstandings are resolved, and lovers and united in marriage all contribute to the play’s classification as a comedy.

**Romance**

Although *The Tempest* contains many elements of comedy, it also deviates significantly from Shakespeare’s other comedies, which is why scholars now classify it as a romance. Romance is a genre that scholars began assigning to a group of plays Shakespeare wrote at the end of his career. These plays, while categorized in the First Folio as either comedies or tragedies, don’t neatly fit the conventions of either genre. Along with Shakespeare’s other late plays *Pericles, Cymbeline,* and *The Winter’s Tale,* *The Tempest* contains elements of both tragedy and comedy, with the overall structure of the play moving from “tragic” beginning to “comedic” ending. These four plays also all contain elements of magic and the supernatural. For example, the massive storm that opens *Tempest* is the result of Prospero’s conjuring. Throughout the play, Prospero (and his magical spirit Ariel) use magic to manipulate and dazzle the other characters. Finally, *The Tempest* differs from the comedic genre in that while the play ends in marriage, the story of the lovers doesn’t drive the plot. In fact, Miranda and Ferdinand don’t meet until well into the action of the play, and the essential conflict—Prospero’s desire to regain his title—has nothing to do with their separation or reunion. All of Shakespeare’s romances also feature marriage as an element of their plots, but not the driving force of the action.