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Theme of forgiveness in the play "The Tempest"

The Tempest was published in 1623. Along with "Cymbeline" and "A Winter's Tale", it belongs to the last period of Shakespeare's dramatic work, which Edward Dowden had named "On the heights". The 'Tempest' is different from Shakespeare's earlier plays in one important point. This difference is evident in all of Shakespeare's play which constitute his last group. In his earlier plays, punishment inevitably follows crime with remorseless and relentless vehemence.

This does not happen in this play, for instead of retribution there is forgiveness and God's mercy for the sinners. This is a direct contradiction of the austere and remorseless destiny accepted by the classicists and by Shakespeare in his tragedies. Prospero forgives all his enemies in the finest tradition of Christian virtue. Even Ariel is made to speak about this virtue, though being a spirit, and hence non-human, he has no fascination for any faith. Prospero manages to elevate himself due to these virtue despite his resentment for the "high wrongs" done to him.

"Though with their high wrongs I am struck to the quick,

Yet with my nobler reason' gainst my fury

Do I take part; the rare action is

In virtue than in vengeance; they being penitent,

The sole drift of my purpose doth extend

Not a frown further."

The Prospero of the enchanted island is different from the Prospero of Milan twelve years earlier. Not only does he elevate his magic to supernatural levels but also elevates himself to a pedestal where he has the wisdom and tranquility of a saint. It is his potent magic which brings all his enemies to their knees, and entirely at his mercy. It is his serene wisdom which inspires him to rise above personal painful memories and forgive his deceivers.

Prospero does not forgive his enemies without giving them anxious moments, and by ensuring that they are resoundingly reminded of their crimes. Prospero deals with his three enemies, Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian as a group instead of dealing with them separately. There is first the bewildering delusion of the appearance and vanishing of the banquet, stage managed by Ariel and his other spirits. The sense of awe is not yet fully over when Ariel tells Alonso that his son Ferdinand is dead because of his crime committed against Prospero and Miranda. He tells the three sinners that they should get ready for "lingering perdition" - worse than any death" if they do not have heartfelt sorrow and a clear life" to follow. The idea of repentance is thus sown in the minds of three sinners.

Having brought the three sinners to the brink of insanity Ariel goes to report the plight of the three to his master, Prospero. After this Ariel appeals to Prospero to show mercy towards the distraught sinners. Prospero assures Ariel that he intends to punish them only up to a certain point and then forgive them. All he wants is to make them realise the gravity of their crimes, and knows that "the rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance". He commands Ariel to bring Alonso and his companions to him. Ariel does as ordered, and Prospero forgives his enemies, thus bringing the theme of forgiveness to its climax.

There has been much comment about forgiveness following repentance and regeneration. Yet among the three sinners regeneration is evident in really true terms in Alonso alone. His redemption begins

seen after the loss of his son in the shipwreck. It is a nerve racking anguish of a father. When a distraught Alonso wanders through the island thoughts must have run through his mind in his moments of extreme sorrow. It is not difficult to presume that he must have prayed to god that he would atone for his sins if he were to see contentment again. The hazy reflection over his past sins is brought in to sharp focus when Ariel, in the shape of a harpy, reminds him of his crimes against Prospero and Miranda twelve years ago. It is here that his repentance becomes both intense and genuine. This redemption and repentance is, however, not visible in the other two sinners. Sebastian is a minor character, and we can understand Shakespeare passing lightly over his psychological insights and elevation. But Antonio is a major character, and his crime is worst of the three, since he betrays a generously trusting brother. Even as Prospero pardons the three sinners, Sebastian and Antonio are more preoccupied in considering whether Caliban and other spirits are "marketable" or not, and whether or not "will money buy them?" There is hardly any other remarks uttered by them by way of genuine repentance. Though he returns Prospero his dukedom of Milan, there is more than an ample hint that Antonio does so more out of fear of Prospero's potent magic power rather than any genuine repentance.

Prospero's forgiveness of his enemies is a voluntary act. Once he forgives them it brings about complete reconciliation between him and Alonso. Alonso seeks Prospero's forgiveness after he assures him that his dukedom would be restored to him. It is at this juncture that Prospero displays to Alonso and his companions the pleasing sight of Ferdinand engrossed in a game of chess with Miranda. After Alonso has also asked for Miranda's forgiveness, he joins his son's hands with those of Miranda's in a final gesture of complete reconciliation and all round joy and happiness.

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