

The Tempest :

1. Elements of Tragicomedy in The Tempest

A tragicomedy is a work which does not fit with either a tragedy or a comedy. It is not light hearted enough to be called a comedy and it does not include death or any other awful event to be called a tragedy. A tragedy is basically a serious story which often involves the death of one or more characters and it generally has a tragic end. A comedy is a lightened, funny story that has a happy ending. A tragicomedy, thus, is a play that is neither a comedy nor a tragedy, although it has the features of both.

'The Tempest' is considered by many critics as the last play that Shakespeare wrote alone. In this play, Shakespeare artistically blends aspects of both tragic and comic forms: a sorrowful scene is immediately followed by an amusing scene and vice versa. On one hand, the play has enough comic elements to lighten the tragic elements and on the other hand, it has enough tragic elements to intensify the comic elements. So, it is difficult to categorise 'The Tempest' as either a tragedy or a comedy. The published versions of Shakespeare's work also make it difficult to determine what he intended. The First Folio classified 'The Tempest' as a comedy. Later published collections classify it as a 'Romance' but this is not a really accurate category to use either. 'The Tempest' contains no major love story in its plot, so the term 'Romance' does not seem to be suitable. The play has some comic elements: the characters of Caliban and Ariel are often played for comic relief. However, it is also possible for both of these characters

to be played with more tragic content : both are bound by servitude, and beg for their freedom, which makes them somewhat tragic.

• Elements of tragedy in 'The Tempest'

The Tempest contains some elements of a tragedy specially a Shakespearean tragedy. Here we find Prospero, like the tragic heroes of Shakespearean play, a problem in an unusual situation. He has a tragic flaw, since he is negligent towards his prime responsibility, which is the governance of Milan. He is the absentmindedness of the scholar which is the direct cause of his loss of dukedom. That he knows about his flaws and overcomes them means that in this play also Shakespeare brings forward his primary emotion, that Character is Destiny. In his earlier tragedies the tragic hero gets one chance to escape his downfall, which he ignores; and the result is catastrophic. Shakespeare appears to tell us that there is no second chance given in this world, for punishment inevitably follows sin and error. There is thus a sense of the inevitability of destiny in the tragedies, where suffering and death is a foregone conclusion. No such things happen in 'The Tempest'. Prospero may have a fatal flaw, and it may have resulted in his downfall. There may have been resublimation after catharsis, but the ill-fortune that falls on him is not irreversible. In his last plays Shakespeare shifts from the Greek concept of tragedy and destiny and adopts instead the gentler Christian lesson of forgiveness of injuries and God's mercy for sinners. The spirit of punishment and retribution is totally missing in all of his last group of plays, including 'The Tempest'.

Elements of Comedy in 'The Tempest'

In addition the play has distinct elements of a comedy. It has the innocent romance between Ferdinand and Miranda. They fall in love at first sight, not unlike what happens in Shakespeare's comedies. The play's setting is remote and idyllic, quite similar to some of his comedies like "As You Like It" which is set in the forest of Arden. There is a spirit of adventure in the play, which deals more with domestic values rather than high placed strife. Prospero may have been a duke, but he is presented primarily as a father, a magician and a philosopher. He indulges neither in the inordinate ambition of Macbeth, nor in the vain egotism of King Lear. Moreover the play has a large number of songs which are predominant in a comedy.

In spite of above features of comedy, we can not categorise 'The Tempest' as a comedy. There is innocent love between Ferdinand and Miranda but the stress is not on their love and marriage, for throughout play there is a fair sprinkling of dance and music, but this too has a quaint quality about it which is so very different from the love songs of Shakespeare's true comedies. It must not be forgotten that Prospero has the makings of a tragic hero. His irresponsibility towards the governance of the state and his inactive learning are his fatal flaws which result in disastrous consequences, when he is ousted from Milan and abandoned on the high seas along with his three year daughter. The emotions that we undergo are those of pity and awe. After this what we experience is a terrible thunderstorm produced by the supernatural element in the form of Ariel and Caliban, something which a Shakespearean comedy never has. Though Shakespeare has given to these two characters distinct realistic

attributes, we cannot forget that they are unreal, since one is merely a spirit and the other a natural savage.

The Tempest: A Tragi-Comedy

Appropriately, 'The Tempest' can be deemed to be a tragi-comedy, since all its five acts have a blend of sad and amusing elements. In the first scene of the play we have a terrible storm in which a ship carrying royal personages is about to be wrecked. It is the sort of scene that would cause immense terror and awe in the minds of the audience and readers. But in the midst of the terrible storm, we have the gaiety of Gonzalo as he ridicules the boatswain for having spoken ill of the King. In the next scene Prospero narrates to Miranda the sad story about his ouster from Milan. He also reminds Ariel of the witch, Sycorax. Immediately afterwards we have the ugly and uncouth Caliban speak in an insolent manner to Prospero. The mood would have remained sad and agonising but for the fact that Ferdinand and Miranda fall in love with each other. Thus sorrow and agony is soon replaced with love and joy. Gonzalo's depiction of an ideal commonwealth is also bound to raise mirth and laughter, since it has such extremes that it is bound to appear as absurd. Amidst this comical absurdity we have the horror of knowing that Antonio prevails upon Sebastian to assassinate Alonso.

In another scene we find comedy between Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban. Act three begins with the exchanging of vows of love between Ferdinand and Miranda. This is followed by another comic interlude between Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban. And when the invisible Ariel appears on the scene and causes confusion between the three, the fun that it creates is truly joyful. But soon afterwards Caliban suggests that Prospero be murdered.

The last act of the play is predominantly serious though the final denouement is happy. Ariel tells Prospero about the miserable condition of the three sinners and the agonised lamenting of Gonzalo. He asks forgiveness for the three sinners and the agonised lamenting of Gonzalo. He asks forgiveness for the three sinners to which Prospero readily agrees. After this Ariel lures the deceivers and the sinners in to the enchanted circle and Prospero makes a long speech about his supernatural powers and his unusual deeds on the island. He reminds Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian about their hideous crimes, but nonetheless forgives them for their terrible deeds.

Thus *The Tempest* is a blend of tragic and comic elements. It is not a tragedy because it has a happy ending and a surfeit of comedy and romance. It can also not be accepted to be pure comedy because it has a fair amount of sorrow and other tragic elements present in a Shakespearean comedy. Hence the term *tragi-comedy* is appropriate for the play.

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