

The significance of
time and place:
comparing 'the
tempest' and 'the
winter's tal...



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The utilisation of time and place is of great consequence in the late plays, *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*. In the former, Shakespeare creates unity of both time and place in order to explore his central concerns, whereas the latter is disparate in both elements, with the action taking place between two settings – namely Sicily and Bohemia – and over a time span of sixteen years. Despite such differences, time and place function in both plays to communicate Shakespeare's concerns; in particular, the idea of regeneration is highlighted through the dramatic significance of each of these elements.

In *The Tempest*, there is a unity of time and place which reminds us that Prospero, as a symbolic rendering of the playwright himself, is in control of much of the action, especially at the start as he lays out his plans to Miranda:

“Hast thou, spirit, Perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee?”

In this way, we see that Prospero is in control of time within the play in that he will utilise it to bring his enemies to justice while they remain on the island. There are regular references to time within the play, even the shipwreck itself is not solely the result of Prospero's magical abilities, but also:

“depend[s] upon / A most auspicious star, whose influence / If now I court not, but omit / My fortunes will ever after droop.”

Here, we see that time is working together with fate, personified in “a most auspicious star” to allow Prospero to take control of events. By bringing his

brother and company to the island, it becomes clear how important place is to his revenge: if he is unable to bring his enemies into his pseudo-kingdom, he will not be able to bring his plans to fruition. In this way, the unity of time and place are essential to Prospero's success as they both serve to make him the more powerful player in the tale.

Shakespeare saw through time, it has been argued, a possibility of renewal. In *The Tempest*, we see this in the timing of Prospero's planning: although the play takes place in real time (Alonso makes reference to audience time being parallel to that of the play when he mentions, at the end, that it has been "only three hours since" the shipwreck), the events that the play centres on have been a long time in the making. In Prospero's discourse to Miranda at the start, his preoccupation with past injustices suggests that his timing is not random:

"Twelve year since, Miranda, twelve year since, Thy father was the Duke of Milan and A prince of power."

Although revenge is at the forefront of Prospero's thoughts, the fact that he has waited twelve years to act upon his intentions implies that regeneration – the return of his daughter to a place of power (as is her birth rite) and, by extension, a reclaiming of his stolen Dukedom – is a key goal for Prospero. Consequently, he manipulates time as if it were another character under his spell in order to regain his former life. The ambiguous "Now I arise" of that same opening soliloquy implies how the time is now right for such regeneration.

Furthermore, place is significant as a dramatic device in *The Tempest* as the unity of the island setting from start to finish acts as a microcosm for the wider world, thus mirroring the real world outwith the play with its deceptions and twists of fate that were (and are) inherent in everyday life. In contrast with *The Winter's Tale*, which takes place between two juxtaposed settings, Shakespeare emphasises regeneration through the intensity of a small island which reflects society as a whole. At the time of writing, Renaissance England was still mourning the death of Elizabeth I; the succession of James VI as king, it can be argued, would have been at the forefront of Shakespeare's mind, thus influencing the subject matter of Prospero's usurpation ("The King of Naples, being an enemy ...Should presently extirpate me and mine/Out of the dukedom and confer fair Milan/With all the honours on my brother..."). In addition, the often argued idea of Prospero being a fictional manifestation of Shakespeare himself lends further credence to the role of place as a microcosm: like the playwright, Prospero ultimately relinquishes his power to control the fate of others, leaving the island and breaking unity of place only after the play ends.

In setting the play within an uninhabited island Shakespeare creates a distance that opens up the collective audience's realms of possibility and their imaginative involvement from the outset. This pastoral setting meant that the audience would expect action to be more symbolic than real. Therefore, Shakespeare's choice in location opens up an abstract setting wherein a more philosophical message about forgiveness as opposed to vengeance is displayed. This idea is personified in the character of Miranda who, upon seeing the "strangers" on her heretofore deserted island

exclaims, “ O, brave new world!” At once naïve and joyful, Miranda’s words here reflect how place has been utilised by Shakespeare to show how, by our actions, humanity has the power to change the nature of a place. The entry of these new people to Miranda’s personal, pastoral reality may also symbolise the expansion of the world through exploration. In this way, regeneration is at the forefront of the playwright’s thoughts as he evokes a newfound sense of possibility in the magic of the island and the people within, as well as a fear of what the new might bring – a fear in line with the growing trend towards colonialism:

“ O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people in’t!”

The ambiguity of Miranda’s words here convey the duplicitous nature of island life now, as well as the world outside of the play: her words are tainted by a darkness caused by her ignorance of what these men really are and what some of them are capable of. Nonetheless, her youthful joy and new marriage to Ferdinand bring us back to the consideration that the island – their place of meeting – has regeneration at its heart.

Similarly, the pastoral setting of *The Winter’s Tale* is significant in its juxtaposition with the highly dramatic Sicilia, making place dramatically significant once again. Like Miranda, Perdita is ignorant of the past; however, Perdita’s past lies within the boundaries of the play itself and is remembered by the audience. Though there is less unity of time and place in this play, the thematic regeneration could be considered more potent than in its counterpart: the distance of time from the tragic goings-on of Sicilia allows

the audience to invest more authentically in the idea of this renewal of life through the kings' respective offspring:

“ Thou dearest Perdita, With these forced thoughts, I prithee, darken not The mirth o' the feast... Your guests are coming: Lift up your countenance, as it were the day Of celebration of that nuptial which We two have sworn shall come.”

This gap in time and place from sixteen years previous allow for a purer sense of regeneration and renewal than we ever feel in *The Tempest*: in this, Prospero's regeneration ironically means death for him as he concedes to his daughter and Ferdinand's youth, yet the older generation, flawed and wizened as they are, are buoyed up by the new life that the youngsters bring. It can be argued that time and place play a significant role in this: time's passage (although atypical of Shakespeare's canon and criticised in his day) make it easier to believe that true regeneration has taken place and that Leontes has repented and suffered waiting for this to come about.

Moreover, the direct contrast between time in *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* is significant in its effect. By creating a gap of sixteen years in the play, unlike the real time of the island setting, the playwright allows for a certain pathos to be felt for our fallen hero: his pain and regret are made real to us in their longevity, thereby making Shakespeare's defiance of the unity of time, place and action (a Greek idea that all action of a play must span 24 hours) a worthwhile one in allowing for rights to be wronged organically, rather than through the magic of *The Tempest*.

Ironically, until the final scenes of reunion, any regeneration is muted as we realise that the sixteen years of lost time in which the young Perdita and Florizel were growing up in spring-time Bohemia has, in fact, been time that stood still in Sicilia:

“ Whilst I remember Her and her virtues, I cannot forget My blemishes in them, and so still think of The wrong I did myself; which was so much, That heirless it hath made my kingdom and Destroy’d the sweet’st companion that e’er man Bred his hopes out of.”

Leontes, it seems, is living as though frozen in time – too guilty to move on from such heinous crimes. Prospero, too, is reluctant to move forward, not due to his own sins but those of others. Consequently, the titular winter always looms over Sicilia, giving this place a desolate and hopeless symbolism. Conversely, Bohemia with its youth and lust for life is depicted as pastoral and spring-like:

“ Come, take your flowers: Methinks I play as I have seen them do In Whitsun pastorals: sure this robe of mine Does change my disposition.”

Perdita’s words here convey life as a celebration: the time of the year and the implied meadow where the aforementioned flowers are plucked are clearly significant in creating an overt juxtaposition between mourning Sicilia, steeped in winter and Bohemia, a place that “ Does change [the] disposition”. This master stroke from Shakespeare strengthens the central concern of regeneration as, by the apposition of the two kingdoms of the play and the symbolic details therein, the far-reaching consequences of one man’s actions resonate in both place and time.

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The use of place is also key in Prospero's regeneration with the pastoral setting once again foreshadowing the hero's renewal of spirit. If the island, with all its " Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not" is analogous with the biblical Garden of Eden, then Prospero is an Adam who has repented his wrongs, namely the temptations of magic, to be reborn in this paradisiac setting. Additionally, the parallel of the play with real time is integral in helping us to understand Prospero's need for forgiveness: we are aware that he has been on the island for many years and that he has, as a result, grown old; so, by this logic, it can be argued that the approaching demise and death of the character has left him looking for a new life of the spirit before his body succumbs to the march of time:

" Now my charms are all o'erthrown, And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint: now, 'tis true, I must be here confined by you, Or sent to
Naples... And my ending is despair, Unless I be relieved by prayer... As you
from crimes would pardon'd be, Let your indulgence set me free."

Here, the dramatic significance of time and place are both felt in Prospero's plea: neither of these entities are on his side as he moves towards his final days. He no longer has power over time and place – he is, in fact, " most faint". From this, we see that he must gain renewal from the audience and its forgiveness if he is to escape the island and the binds of time (" set me free"); this is an extension of the Eden analogy with the audience being cast in the role of God/Shakespeare/creator, a role once filled by Prospero himself. If he is not forgiven, he must remain " confined" on this island as penance for his sins, thus reminding us of the significance of place within the play as almost another character who swings the final sword of justice.
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Place, as discussed, is also dramatically significant in *The Winter's Tale*, acting as a paradise of regeneration in Bohemia and a sixteen-year purgatory in Sicilia. Time, however, is given the final word as Hermione, "dead" for sixteen years, transcends time's boundaries to return to life at the end in an act of resurrection that results in new life both physically (or so it appears) and symbolically in the reunion of husband, wife and child. With the exception of the tragic Mamillius, time has played the role of the proverbial healer for the three remaining members of the royal family:

"'Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach; Strike all that look upon with marvel. Come, I'll fill your grave up: stir, nay, come away, Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him Dear life redeems you."

Herein lies the dramatic significance of time within the play: Paulina's words – in her final duty to King and Queen – convey an unnatural reversal of time's work as Hermione shakes off death's grasp to bring about the ultimate reconciliation and exoneration of Leontes. The last sixteen years melt away (as if by the magic of Prospero) as Hermione is instructed to "Bequeath to death [her] numbness"; this command can be directed to both husband and wife here as Leontes has paralleled Hermione in a living death from which he has now been redeemed. Sicilia, in this last scene, retains its solemnity; however, the hushed atmosphere is now a mark of holy awe as opposed to the despair and grief of the past. Sicilia therefore retains its independence from pastoral Bohemia and remains dramatically significant until the very end.

Time and place are both integral to the late romances of Shakespeare. In the tragicomedies of *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*, we are presented with two tales whereby the heroes go in search of reconciliation and regeneration. In *The Tempest*, we are privy to a story told using the classical unities of time and place; the action takes place in real time, as opposed to the atypical gap of sixteen years in *The Winter's Tale* which provides the possibility for the "magic" of resurrection and reunion. Having one concentrated setting intensifies the action as Prospero - once a master of said time and place - moves ever closer to his ultimate goal and gives up his power to the will of the audience. Conversely, we have seen that, for Leontes, time has served as both a gaoler and a redeemer: the years of penance have brought him to true repentance and finally reunited him with those he failed so long ago. Finally, place is significant when considered through the juxtaposition of the two settings: Sicilia highlights sin and death, while Bohemia is unencumbered by such woes and, in counterpoint to the former, provides a sense of innocence and hope for renewal. This being said, it is clear that time and place, tools of great dramatic significance, are utilised by Shakespeare in a skilled and thoughtful manner to convey the inherent theme of regeneration in each play. After consideration of both tales, it cannot be denied that these elements are key to moving the journeys of both characters forward and, finally, leading them to redemption. It may not, then, be far from the mark to suggest that Prospero's closing lines are not a plea to the audience, but are, indeed, a heartfelt request to

Time and Place personified:

"As you from crimes would pardon'd be, Let your indulgence set me free."