

In what ways does the structure of the winter's tale serve its main preoccupation...



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The Winter's Tale belongs to a small group of plays which have been labelled 'the problem plays' as they do not fit comfortably into the classifications of either Comedy, History or Tragedy. Therefore it joins Pericles, Cymbeline, and The Tempest in the list of the genre-defying later plays that are usually referred to as "romances or tragicomedies" (Justin Eller 1972). The Winter's Tale falls into this category as it has a unique dramatic structure and the results of this, "daring experiment", has divided critical opinion throughout the decades: On one hand some critics declare that it has allowed a, "genius" (Thomas R. Price 1890) to fully explore the boundaries of tragedy and comedy. Whereas others state that due to the careful structure, "none of the characters show much philosophic depth" (Hartley Coleridge 1851). People have regarded The Winter's Tale as a "tragicomedy" because it is constructed like two facing pages from an open book with one half representing a tragedy and the other a comedy.

The second half contrasts with and complements the first half to form a complete work of art. Thus The Winter's Tale is said to have an hourglass structure with the same sand (content) running through in different directions (genres) for each half. This, "diptych" allows for the exploration of many contrasts and similar themes. However, Shakespeare has concentrated so much on completing this unique structure that he seems to have overlooked a number of faults and inconsistencies in The Winter's Tale.

One can see the tragic convention being followed in the first half of the play when paralleling it with the traditional aspects of tragedy: The simple plot line with more verse is set in mid "Winter" and is about "a sad tale" in which the King of Sicilia's tragic flaw of his "jealousies" and his tragic error

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of disobeying the moral law of the gods results in many terrible consequences. These include the loss of his daughter and the deaths of his wife, son and his own virtual death as he vows to, once a day, “ visit / The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there shall be my recreation” and he does this for sixteen years. A lot of these events occur in the Act III Scene II, since this act is the best example of a scene written in the realistic style of the tragic mode because a high born character accuses his wife and goes against the moral law of gods resulting in the loss of his wife and son. Here Shakespeare seems to have attempted to create a mini tragedy within the larger tragedy of the first half. Furthermore as in the tragedy of King Lear, this play is full of “ divisions”: There is not only divided families, with Leontes accusing Hermione of being a “ slippery”.

.. “ hobby horse” and an “ adult’ress” without any evidence and claiming that his son, “ is the issue of Polixenes”. But there is also a divided nation as revealed when Leontes thinks he is in “ A nest of traitors! ” because all his subjects know that Leontes is “ forcing faults upon Hermione”.

Moreover, as the structure itself is disjointed this helps to emphasise the division in the play. Therefore at the end of the first three acts there is the destruction and division that is necessary for the comedy to ensue as reconciliation can now occur. As Leontes has fallen into a living death, the tragic message is established and Shakespeare now allows us to enter the pastoral world of comedy. In this new world all the destruction that was caused is reconciled when the oracle’s prophecy is fulfilled once Perdita who was, “ lost”, is, “ found”.

In a more complex plot with more prose the young lovers Florizel and Perdita, after many mistaken identities, find a solution to their parental opposition so that in the end they are allowed to marry. This partnership allows reconciliation to take place as Hermione comes back to Leontes who also renews his friendship with Polixenes, hence there is a happy ending. Shakespeare establishes the comic tradition particularly effectively in the character of Autolycus, the courtier turned vagabond. Here Shakespeare is implying a humorous insight into the world of the courtiers.

Moreover, Autolycus is a con-man, and as such, takes advantage of his victims, regardless of their state of wealth. Notably, he steals the money of the poor clown and has the audacity to tell the clown he, “ ha’ done” him, “ a charitable office”. This situation of how the once well-to-do courtier takes money from the poor may seem tragic, but it is still humorous in the way that it is portrayed. Autolycus’ major scene is in Act IV Scene IV where Shakespeare seems to be paralleling the events in the tragedy by creating a mini comedy as the playwright invokes many comic devices in this scene such as, people disguising themselves and lovers with lots of opposition who eventually escape. But when Autolycus decides that he has, “ a mind to be honest”, he makes Florizel aware of Perdita’s heritage and this action moves the story along to its happy ending.

Therefore the structure of *The Winter’s Tale* makes, “ the first half dark and serious, whereas the second is mostly playful and distinctly comic” (Gill 1998). These two distinct halves are coupled at the very centre of the play when Time the Destroyer (tragedy) announces that sixteen years have passed and turns his glass, thus reversing the irresistible momentum of <https://assignbuster.com/in-what-ways-does-the-structure-of-the-winters-tale-serve-its-main-preoccupations/>

irretrievable loss which characterizes tragedy. From now on the processes of Time the Reconciler (comedy) will not be destruction, decay and death, but birth growth and renewal. Time is almost like Shakespeare himself holding the two parts of the play together creating a unifying force that is trying to, “ o’erwhelm custom” with its experimental structure. The two halves are also unified by the use of the constant imagery in the play involving the flow of life through all things, in nature and mankind alike. This is shown by the way the cycle of the seasons parallels the themes of the play so that, “ A sad tale’s best for Winter”.

But the “ spring” that follows this destructive winter brings regeneration. Moreover certain characters such as Camillo unite the play as in both halves as he leaves his masters to preserve his moral dignity. Paulina also assists this unification as she helps to cause the division and destruction of Leontes’ family by arranging Hermione feigned death. But she then brings about the reconciliation when she persuades Leontes to give her, “ the office / To choose”, him, “ a queen”.

Thus she brings Hermione back to life and reforms their marriage. No one would deny that comedies and tragedies are opposites. But symbolically there is another distinguishing feature. Comedies are light and tragedies are dark. Shakespeare uses this view to experiment in what happens to different themes when they are seen in either the tragic or the comic light. Thus he is almost shining the same light through these different lenses and looking at the results: Shakespeare chooses to portray women in highly contrasting ways.

Although Hermione is the tragic victim she is sensible, rational and virtuous throughout the false accusations of her. Her self-defence is emphatic and pathetic in tone: ... “ my past life Hath been as continent, as chaste as true, As I am now unhappy, which is more Than history can pattern” A deep sense of pathos is inherent in this verse. Hermione is quietly and placidly accepting of her fatal destiny.

She is a victim but a dignified victim on trial. Whereas, in the comedy Perdita enters the play and is a somewhat innocent character as she desires that: ... “ The selfsame sun that shines upon his court Hides not his visage from our cottage, but Looks on alike”.

.. Although this is a very pleasant image it is far too idealistic showing her slight naivety of the real world. In the second half there is also Mopsa and Dorcas who only desire “ tawdry-lace and a pair of sweet gloves”. So these women seem very trivial in their wishes far from the righteous Hermione.

But Hermione’s character also appears different under these lenses due to the fact that at first she is decidedly the pitied victim because the unfounded accusations against her evokes a sense of injustice and pathos in the audience. This feeling is magnified when Hermione appears to have been killed. However, she ends up as almost as a supernatural goddess when she is resurrected and then prays to the gods to, “ look down, / And from your sacred vials pour your grace / Upon” Perdita. Moreover, it seems very divine for a person to have such a degree of self-control to keep herself from her husband for sixteen years.

Nevertheless this self-control is rewarded with the reconciliation of her family. This theme of family reconciliation is part of the light of the comedy, because in the tragedy Leontes' "jealousies" results in the loss of his daughter and the, "dead bodies of" his, "queen and son". But it is not only his own family that is tragically destroyed; Paulina's husband, Antigonus, is killed when he is, "pursued by a bear" and the families of Leontes and Polixenes are broken with the loss of their friendship. However, these divisions are all reunited in the comedy by the return of Perdita and thus Hermione and by the marriages of Florizel with Perdita and Paulina with Camillo. Therefore, in the tragedy families suffer division and death, whereas in the comedy they experience love, life and marriage which creates reconciliation. However, it is mainly the young who bring about this amalgamation.

In the tragic darkness the bitterness of the older generation questioning, "Art thou my boy?" results in the death and loss of the young, notably Mamillius and Perdita. Nevertheless, Florizel and Perdita, who represent the young, act as the redeemers in the second half, fusing together with their love the divisions caused by their elders. The young Perdita is especially seen as the saviour because she is the "flower" who keeps, "seeming and savour all the winter long". So she is the person who passes through the winter to herald the summer. These different tragic and comic views are the result of Shakespeare's distinctive structure and clearly show that under these different lights the same actions have hugely diverse results. However, there is still a debate over how this serves the playwright's "main", thematic, "preoccupations".

One can argue that it enhances various themes which Shakespeare is attempting to illustrate to the audience. For example, time in *The Winter's Tale* is seen as the necessary medium for human growth and healing. What seems to be a purely destructive force in the first half is countered by the eventual triumph of the young generation of Perdita and Florizel. This idea is proven as Shakespeare's main source for this play was *Pandosto* which is subtitled *The Triumph of Time*.

In this play, time is understood as an evolutionary force, patiently working from one generation to the next to perfect mankind. This seems to happen in *The Winter's Tale*, as it is the younger generation who manages to solve the faults of the older generation. Therefore, as in *Pandosto*, time brings reconciliation for the faults of the past generations. The major fault of the older generation is that Leontes' jealous imagination distorts his reality when he begins to believe that everyone is against him because all his subjects deem that he is, "forcing faults upon Hermione".

This blindness results in Leontes' tragic downfall. However, he is redeemed when he admits that, "She I killed; I did so; but thou strik'st me / Sorely to say I did". So once Leontes feels sufficient repentance, Paulina allows him to see clearly. Therefore she reveals that the amazingly lifelike statue of Hermione is actually Hermione herself. There are other major polarities exhibited in *The Winter's Tale* about loyalty and betrayal, love and hate, life and death.

Hence Shakespeare may have been showing the audience extremes of human emotion and behaviour which are emphasised by the divided

structure. On the other hand, he may have been attempting to teach us about what life is. In the play the audience views a wide range of tragic and comic emotions and experiences. However, the play finishes with an ending that has a mixture of both comic and tragic feelings. Therefore Shakespeare may have been saying that life is not just a tragedy or a comedy but a mixture of both.

This was very much the case in Shakespeare's own life as on one hand his sister married in 1607 and on the other his mother died in 1608. Not only could Shakespeare have been conveying his own feeling but also he could have been trying to give the audience his view of the contemporary feeling. Especially as in the seventeenth century the civil war was creating doubt about the divine right of kings. This uncertainty is seen in *The Winter's Tale* as the kings are depicted as flawed, blind and self-centred.

They behave in very similar ways, as they both reject their children however their actions have different consequences depending on the genre they are in, because Leontes loses his family for sixteen years whereas Polixenes only loses his son for a very short time. Moreover, the king's will is questioned as seen when Paulina calls Leontes, "A most unworthy and unnatural lord" and his courtiers do not believe his accusations about Hermione. The inadequacy of kings is also seen in *King Lear* as the king's tragic flaw is that he does not want to fulfil a king's obligation of governing for the good of his people. *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale* start out similarly as tragedies; however, the happy ending of *The Winter's Tale* turns it into a tragicomedy. This is because in *The Winter's Tale* love acts as the destroyer, as Leontes "

jealousies" are created through love for Hermione, but ultimately love also is <https://assignbuster.com/in-what-ways-does-the-structure-of-the-winters-tale-serve-its-main-preoccupations/>

the redeemer whereas in King Lear love is the destructive force. Therefore, it is almost as if Shakespeare had a pessimistic attitude towards love when he wrote King Lear, but with the passing of time, he learned to believe in it again and incorporated the redeeming values of love into The Winter's Tale.

So Shakespeare may be showing the audience the different views and his final decision about love. Love is also the catalyst which results in Hermione forgiving Leontes. This forgiveness could be seen as Shakespeare attempting to teach the audience something about moral ideals. Therefore, when Hermione is virtually resurrected, she invokes the Christian value of offering the other cheek when, " she embraces" Leontes hence forgiving him.

Moreover Leontes' journey in the play can be paralleled to a sinner's journey in Catholic teaching: Leontes sins through his, " jealousies" by murdering his wife and consequently he is subjected to " sixteen years" of " sorrows".

Therefore, as in purgatory these years of pain and suffering mean that his soul is cleansed and he can then proceed to heaven.

Similarly in the play after the sixteen years Leontes is seen by Paulina to be sufficiently repentant to be allowed to enter paradise, so Hermione and Perdita are returned to him. Using this idea one can see the parallel to Dante's Divine Comedy that Shakespeare may have been attempting to create. This is because Dante similarly tells the story of a sinners journey from hell to purgatory and finally to heaven. However, the strongest argument for the creation of this dramatic structure seems to be that Shakespeare, " remained a restless experimenter to the end of his career who wished in the last plays to synthesise disparate elements in a manner that allows each to exert its energy" (Stanley Wells).

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Therefore, in *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare is experimenting with how successfully tragedy and comedy could be combined to form a unified whole. Moreover, he was also testing whether this combination would, “ exert an energy” (Stanley Wells) that could enhance the messages that he wished to communicate. Assuming that Shakespeare was experimenting with *The Winter's Tale* there is still a question as to whether it is a successful experiment. Some argue that *The Winter's Tale*, “ is meticulously crafted to form a breathtaking masterpiece” (Stanley Wells).

However, the play may be, “ meticulously crafted” but it still has a number of faults: Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, claimed that tragedy aimed, “ to arouse the emotions of pity and fear”. But the audience is unable to feel pity for Leontes as his rage seems to emerge suddenly and to be completely motiveless. Such absence of motivation is surely more commonly a feature of romance than of the tragic style. Therefore the effect on the audience is far less consuming than that which a straightforward tragedy would evoke meaning that Leontes is not pitied and hence is not a true tragic hero.

This is why Hartley Coleridge maintained that, “ none of the characters show much philosophic depth”. In addition the second half does not adhere to the rule of comedy that no one should die because both Antigonus and Mamillius, the cherished child of Hermione and Leontes, are still tragically dead. Moreover, although at the end all suffering is overcome, we do not find harmony restored in the way that is usual in comedy. The reconciliation of Hermione and Leontes ends not on a note of joy, but on a reminder, through Leontes regretful words, of their separation and the time wasted: “ Lead us hence, where we may leisurely Each one demand and answer to his part
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Performed in this gap of time since first We were disserved” Therefore, resolution is diluted by the lingering reminder of the earlier discord, so that the general effect of the play is far bleaker than would be typical of comedy. Furthermore, the final reconciliation is somewhat unsatisfying because Hermione declares that, “ knowing by Paulina that the oracle / Gave hope thou wast in being” even though she was present when the oracle’s note was read allowed. So there should be no need for Paulina to tell Hermione that the oracle said there was hope of Perdita being found.

Moreover, the sudden marriage between Paulina and Camillo seems very out of character as Paulina has just explained how she will “ lament till” she is, “ lost” for Antigonus. Therefore, The Winter’s Tale is, “ a genuine diptych in construction” because Shakespeare uses an extraordinary skill in his transition from one style to another, combining the different genre in order to achieve overall unity. These contrasting genres gave Shakespeare a massive potential to experiment with contrasts and similar themes. However, in order to achieve the successful “ diptych”, he seems to have sacrificed depth and a satisfactory sense of resolution in the play.