

The tempest essay



The Tempest's first scene is unlike most of the openings in Shakespeare's plays, in that it is very much action-oriented.

Instead of properly introducing some of the main characters, or setting up an important plot strand, this opening scene appears to be only an attention-grabbing device. This statement can be made quite justifiably, due to the fact that all the events of Act 1 Scene 1 are recounted in the following scene, in the conversations between Miranda, Prospero and Ariel. Under ordinary circumstances, it is quite likely that Shakespeare would have removed the first scene and just relied upon the audience paying attention to what was being said in the second scene - indeed, if these events took place some way into the play, he may have considered doing this. However, as an opening scene, Scene 2 would have been rather boring and uninspiring - it consists almost entirely of lengthy explanatory dialogue from Prospero.

Audiences would not have been drawn into the play very effectively; and at the time the play was written, during the 17th Century, audiences were not as reserved and polite as they are these days and they might not have reacted very well to being bored. Scene 1 solves this problem by abandoning all explanation of the events unfolding, as well as much of the characterisation and concentrating on creating an exciting and tense opening scene which immediately engages the audience's attention.

Theatres of the time when The Tempest was written were very basic, and would not have been able to achieve the special effects and clever sets that we see in modern theatres. Therefore, Shakespeare had to rely on more subtle, but equally effective, techniques to convey the correct atmosphere.

One of the most obvious things about this first scene is how short the characters' lines are. There is just one moderately sized speech, lines 20 - 25, but the rest are all only four to six lines long. This hurried dialogue immediately signals that the characters are panicking, and that they do not have time for long conversations. From the script itself, we can see that there are an awful lot of exclamation marks in the dialogue; this is because the characters are shouting to be heard above the noise of the storm. While nowadays the storm would probably be created using recordings of thunder and crashing waves, perhaps along with creaking sounds of the ship breaking up, theatre in Shakespeare's day would not have had this luxury.

They would have had to make do with physically making as much noise as possible and hope that it sounded like thunder. Similarly, whereas we would probably use some clever strobe lighting technique today, Shakespeare would have been more restricted. They may have been forced to use measures such as explosives or brightly flaming chemicals. It is also worth remembering that people at the time read far more into thunder and lightning than we do today; whereas we consider it just a case of bad weather, they may have interpreted it in a more religious, spiritual way. Incidentally, it was these sort of rough-edged special effects' that led to the eventual burning down of the Globe Theatre.

To compliment the hurried and anxious speech, the characters are constantly coming on and off stage; this again lets the audience know that they are very busy. These are very simple ways of conveying tension and excitement but they work remarkably well.

The tension builds swiftly during the scene, as nerves fray and the characters get increasingly panicked – the conversation between the Boatswain and the passengers Antonio and Alonso becomes more and more heated; they eventually resort to insults, although they should be pulling together under such circumstances. Perhaps the single most effective technique used here to convey the right atmosphere is that of the cry within.

‘ This is when somebody shouts something off-stage. For example, lines 58 – 61 read: A confused noise within: “ Mercy on us!~” We split, we split!~” Farewell, my wife and children!~” Farewell, brother!~” We split, we split, we split!~ Shakespeare’s theatre had no effective way of showing the breaking up of the ship on stage, so he resorts to this indirect method, thereby leaving the destruction of ship entirely to the audience’s imagination.

This is far more effective than anything they could have physically achieved on stage; indeed, even a modern theatre would have difficulty enacting this. It would only really be possible to show directly in a film, which, of course, had not even been dreamt of in the 17th Century. This scene would undoubtedly focus the attention of any audience, if it was portrayed effectively. However, this would not necessarily stop their minds wandering during the next scene, which, as mentioned above, is very dialogue-driven.

Therefore, Shakespeare relies on something which has become almost a cliché on modern television drama: He uses a cliffhanger.

A cliffhanger is a technique used in all story-telling media (films, television, novels, theatre...

) whereby the audience is left uncertain as to the ending for a certain amount of time. It is then hoped that the same audience will return to see the next instalment to find out what happens next. Therefore, Act 1 Scene 1 of The Tempest ends with the audience unsure as to whether anybody on the boat survived. A little way into the next scene we find out the fate of the crew and passengers and, by that time, our attention is more-or-less guaranteed. By using these various techniques, Shakespeare manages to achieve with this scene that which every writer aspires to do; that is, draw the audience into the plot and make them want to find out more.