OCR A Level English Literature

Your notes

The Tempest

Contents

- The Tempest: Plot Summary
- The Tempest: Themes
- The Tempest: Characters
- The Tempest: Writer's Methods and Techniques
- The Tempest: Interpretations
- The Tempest: Key Quotations

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

Your notes

Plot Summary

Examiners always praise students who clearly know the plot of the texts they are studying, as having this base of knowledge leads to the best exam responses. Below you will find:

- **A general overview of the whole play**
- **Detailed summaries by act**

Plot storyboard



Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Your notes

Overview

The Tempest is a **romantic comedy** written by the playwright William Shakespeare and first performed in 1611, a time during which the global expansion of the British Empire was a topic of much discussion. Shakespeare's final play highlights aspects of power and control, especially within the context of **colonialism**. Although the play includes **comedic** elements such as disguise, tangled romantic plots and a **resolution** which restores a sense of order through marriage, the play conveys darker, tragic themes. Shakespeare employs **dramatic irony** to depict the simultaneous responses of characters within a claustrophobic and unfamiliar environment. In particular, The Tempest depicts the oppressive control of a flawed ruler who eventually advocates for mercy and forgiveness. The **protagonist**, Prospero, desperate to redeem his identity and dignity, misuses his magical powers to overpower all the characters. Set on an isolated island, under the watchful eye of the **omnipotent** Prospero, Shakespeare depicts characters attempting to survive and thrive in a small, repressed community. Nevertheless, The Tempest's light-hearted presentation of true love, magical spells and supernatural characters bring levity to the play, which concludes that drama, as well as life, is a fleeting illusion.

Examiner Tips and Tricks

Exam Tip

There is not an expectation that you learn dozens of quotations by heart. Although examiners do reward the use of memorised words or lines in your essay, you are also rewarded for reference to the play's dramatic, structural and linguistic techniques. In other words, the term "evidence" is not limited to quotations. The mark scheme rewards your ability to mention audience responses at various points of the play and how these convey thematic ideas. These are called "textual references", and do not have to include direct quotations, but, for the highest marks, must be "precise". A good example of a precise textual reference would be: "In Act I, Scene I, Shakespeare sets up the theme of magic as Prospero and Ariel cast spells on the other characters". In order to make these precise textual references, therefore, it is vital that you know the plot inside out.

Act-By-Act Plot Summary

Act I

- The play begins on board a ship at sea struggling against a storm
- On the ship, a group of noblemen are returning to Italy after a wedding
- The boatswain of the ship, attempting to steer the ship to safety, finds it difficult to control the noblemen as they do not obey his instructions
- On an island nearby, the exiled Duke of Milan and his daughter Miranda watch the chaos

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Miranda, concerned for the sailors, asks her father, Prospero, to stop the storm:
  - Audiences are told that Prospero has magical powers
  - Miranda reveals she thinks her father started the storm himself
- The **protagonist** of the play, Prospero, tells Miranda why he began the storm:
  - On board the ship is his brother, Antonio, who overthrew him as Duke of Milan
  - Also on the ship is Alonso, King of Naples, who captured Prospero and Miranda and set them adrift at sea
  - He explains he wants to wreak revenge on them
  - He explains that Gonzalo, who is on the ship as well, brought him his books before they were sent away and this enabled him to learn magic
- Prospero puts Miranda to sleep with a magic spell and calls to a spirit, Ariel, his servant
- Ariel asks Prospero if he is happy with the storm they created and tells him the men have landed on shore
- Prospero commands Ariel to carry out more of his tasks and, after some dispute, Prospero agrees to free Ariel when the work is complete
- Prospero wakes Miranda and takes her to see Caliban, his other slave:
  - Caliban is introduced as angry about his **servitude**, resentful that Prospero betrayed him and reneged on their former alliance
- Prospero says Caliban cannot be trusted since he tried to seduce Miranda
- Meanwhile, Ariel leads one of the noblemen, Ferdinand, away from shore
- Ferdinand and Miranda meet and fall in love at first sight
- Prospero, wishing to test their love, casts a spell on Ferdinand and locks him in a prison

Act II

- The scene opens with the noblemen washed up on the island
- Alonso, Ferdinand's father, thinks his son, Ferdinand, is lost at sea
- Ariel, invisible to the men, casts a spell to put Alonso and the other men to sleep, except for Antonio and Sebastian
- Antonio suggests to Sebastian that they take this moment to betray Alonso just as they betrayed Prospero years before
- Just as they are about to kill Alonso in his sleep, Ariel wakes him up
- In an elaborate act, full of **irony**, Sebastian and Antonio pretend their swords are drawn to defend themselves on the island against strangers
- Elsewhere on the island, Caliban meets some of the other shipwrecked men who have made their way onto a different part of the island
- Trinculo and Stephano are drunk as they had been drinking on the ship before the storm



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- They give Caliban some of their alcohol which he has never tasted before:
  - Caliban tells Stephano he believes them to be gods and will be their slave



Your notes



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Examiners want to see that you can contextualise the events in the plot looking at scenes with a wider lens and in the context of the whole play. If you know what comes before and after a scene, you can better explain its wider significance and what important developments have happened, or will happen. Therefore, alongside knowing the plot accurately, it is just as important to revise what order things happen in, especially in a **romantic comedy** like The Tempest, in which an array of confusing events take place one after the other.

It is crucial to analyse structure, in order to see how Shakespeare contrasts scenes and creates tension and conveys ideas across the plot.

Act III

- Ferdinand, who is working for Prospero, sees Miranda briefly once a day in exchange for his labour:
  - They express their love and make plans to marry
- However, they are unaware Prospero is watching and overhears them:
  - He tells the audience he has a plan
- In Caliban's cave, the drunken Stephano and Trinculo joke about Caliban, their new "servant-monster"
- Caliban tells Stephano that Prospero is evil and has cheated him out of his home by making him a slave:
  - Ariel, invisible to them, plays a trick on Trinculo, making him appear to be accusing Caliban of lying
  - At this, Stephano hits Trinculo and sends him away
- Caliban convinces Stephano to kill Prospero so he can make Miranda his wife:
  - Ariel begins to sing and Caliban reassures Stephano that the island is full of spirits and they follow the sound
- Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio and Gonzalo are desperate in their search for Ferdinand
- In secret, Sebastian and Antonio plot to reattempt to kill Alonso
- At a banquet that night, Ariel appears as a spirit and tells the men why they are here, that Prospero remembers their **treachery**
- Prospero tells Ariel he is pleased and tells the audience he now has full control

Act IV

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Prospero decides to set Ferdinand free and bless his marriage to Miranda:
  - He creates a fantastical vision of spirits who bless their marriage
- Suddenly, in the middle of the wedding blessing, Prospero remembers Caliban's conspiracy with Stephano
- He summons Ariel, who reports that Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo are drunk:
  - With this information, Prospero sends Ariel to distract the men with fancy clothing
  - The spirits and Ariel appear and chase Stephano, Trinculo and Caliban away



Your notes

Act V

- Prospero, in a passionate **soliloquy**, reflects on his success, yet reveals his tricks are unsatisfying
- He decides, with Ariel's counsel, to give up magic and relinquish control
- He sends Ariel to release the men from their spells and bring them to him
- Prospero reveals himself as the former duke of Milan and forgives Alonso
- Antonio hands back the dukedom to Prospero
- Alonso explains that he still mourns the loss of his son, Ferdinand
- Prospero cleverly replies that he also lost his daughter in the storm, and presents the married couple in a mirage, showing Miranda and Ferdinand together
- Prospero sends Ariel to release Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo and invites the noblemen to spend the night before they return to Milan
- Prospero asks Ariel to do one more task for him, to see them safely to Italy
- The play ends with Prospero's direct address to the audience, in which he says their applause will set him free

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

Your notes

Themes

Having a thorough grasp of the following themes, and crucially, how and why Shakespeare explores these themes will enable you to produce a "conceptualised response" in your exam. Linking carefully to the structure of the plot and what we know about the attitudes of the time period will give you access to the very highest marks on the mark scheme.

- **Power and control**
- **Magic and illusion**
- **Loss and betrayal**

Examiner Tips and Tricks

Examiners want to see students connecting themes to the plot structure: how the theme is presented in the beginning, how it develops and how it is shown at the end. This will ensure you are analysing structural conventions, as well as thematic ideas. By considering the plot as a **story arc** driving home the messages within the themes, your analysis should explore how the characters and themes develop, and why Shakespeare chose to convey these themes through the genre of **comedy**.

Power and control


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Power and control

In The Tempest, characters are presented as powerful based on their ability to control their environment and make others submit to their authority. For many of the characters, knowledge is a driving factor in gaining **autonomy**. Those without knowledge are presented as powerless and oppressed. Shakespeare, through the **protagonist**, Prospero, manipulates the characters' sense of control. In this way, Shakespeare explores the misuse of power gained through fear.

Knowledge and evidence:


Your notes

- In the **exposition**, audiences see noblemen hindering their own survival as they refuse to take orders from the ship's boatswain:
  - This leads to the shipwreck, during which they almost lose their lives and Alonso loses his son
  - However, all the sailors are under the control of Prospero, who has used his spirit slave to create a storm
- In the **rising action**, Shakespeare highlights the theme of **tyrannical** and **authoritarian** settlers:
  - It is **ironic** that Prospero, who needs Ariel to carry out much of his magic, has as much control: this highlights Ariel's loyalty and submission
  - Sycorax, upon arrival on the island with her son Caliban, imprisons Ariel
  - Prospero's desire to control the characters on the ship and on the island is vengeful
  - Prosero's enslavement of Ariel (while she pays him back for releasing her) shows Prospero as a self-absorbed and controlling character:
- Shakespeare highlights the effects of Prospero's **treachery** and thirst for power through Caliban's character:
  - Audiences are introduced to Caliban as a "savage" who vehemently expresses his hatred of Prospero's oppressive leadership
  - Caliban's violent conspiracy with Stephano presents the danger of **authoritarian** control
- Shakespeare depicts the way Prospero, as Miranda's father, uses his magical powers to control her, limiting her agency on the island:
  - He hides information from her and manipulates her marriage
- However, Shakespeare illustrates the limits of human power:
  - By the **resolution**, Prospero finds himself powerless against negative reactions to his controlling behaviour
- Shakespeare illustrates how Prospero's mercy and humility is rewarded:
  - Ironically, many events, such as Miranda's marriage and his decision to leave the island, remain under his control
  - Alonso gives back the dukedom, and he and Prospero unite through the marriage of their children:

What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare challenges social constructs regarding power and authority:
  - He illustrates the way **tyrannical** leadership is oppressive
- Shakespeare presents vengeful characters who seek to take back control with violence
- Shakespeare raises questions about **colonisation** by depicting strangers who exploit and control the inhabitants of the island

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

Patriarchal structures in Renaissance England



Your notes

Knowledge and evidence:

- The **patriarchal** system in **Renaissance** families advocated that women were not equal to men:
  - Respect and status were earned via **patriarchal** definitions of female sexuality
- The **patriarchal** structure at the time advocated that men should supervise women economically, sexually, legally and politically:
  - Throughout the play Miranda obeys her father's commands and remains under his control regarding her education, sexuality and marriage
- The Tempest's only other female character is the absent mother of Caliban, Sycorax, who is presented as evil, although she behaves similarly to Prospero:
  - It could be argued that Sycorax symbolises a female character exiled for her threat to **patriarchal** systems
  - Prospero considers her magic to be evil and accuses her of having sexual relations with the devil
  - In the play, she is referred to as a witch who was banished from Argier for her magic
- Ariel, the spirit under Prospero's command, has an **ambiguous** gender:
  - While the play refers to the feminine qualities of the spirit, male **pronouns** are used, suggesting the fluid gender of the nymph

What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare shows **Jacobean** females isolated under their father's control
- Shakespeare raises questions about female **autonomy** within **patriarchal** societies
- Shakespeare illustrates gender as a fluid concept

Magic and illusion


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Magic and illusion

In The Tempest, Prospero uses illusion and magic for good and bad. Often, his magic exposes the true nature of duplicitous characters. At other times, he uses it to wreak revenge

or control characters' lives. Critics have suggested that the play's **protagonist** is based on the playwright himself, as he weaves tangled webs and resolves conflicts as he chooses. In the **resolution,** Prospero asks audiences for applause to set him free. As The Tempest is his last play, it has been suggested this is Shakespeare's voice.


Your notes

Knowledge and evidence:

- **Duality** between illusion and reality is presented via the natural environment, the island's strange-looking inhabitants and the "unnatural" strangers who arrive:
  - Prospero considers himself more knowledgeable and civilised than Caliban, however Caliban's knowledge of the land is said to help Prospero survive
  - Prospero teaches Caliban language which allows the strange-looking "monster" to communicate on the same level as Prospero
  - When Stephano and Trinculo arrive on the island with wine, Caliban is naive to the effects of alcohol: this presents the men as powerful, despite their obvious drunken state
- In the **exposition**, the theme of illusion is presented as Shakespeare depicts a reversal of power:
  - The powerful duke and his noblemen lack the skill or knowledge of the captain and boatswain during the storm
  - Their powerful status in their homeland is depicted as useless at sea and on the island, on "neutral territory"
- The theme of magic is presented as a powerful tool to expose truth and manipulate others, particularly through the **omniscient** power Prospero appears to have on the island
- However, in the **epilogue**, Prospero's **soliloquy** presents the idea that reality does not exist:
  - He considers that "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep", suggesting life is illusory
- Illusions created by Ariel create much of the humour in the play through **dramatic irony**:
  - Characters take advantage of brief moments of apparent control, which the audience knows are Ariel's illusions

What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare comments on the danger of the illusion of power and control
- Shakespeare raises questions about the abuse of power related to cultural knowledge
- Shakespeare illustrates the limited power of humanity

The Tempest as a tragi-comedy

Knowledge and evidence:

- The play is in the form of a **comedy**, however it touches on themes which are more in line with a **tragedy**, such as the psychological torment experienced by Ariel and Caliban:
  - Prospero uses his magic and power over Ariel to control events and expose truths, thus, acting as a **deus ex machina**
- Typical of a **comedy**, Shakespeare ends The Tempest with a restoration of order via a wedding:
  - However the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand is not closely connected to the play's main conflict which undermines the theme of love
- A convention of **comedy** is to resolve earlier complications and clarify misunderstandings:
  - Prospero returns to Italy as Duke of Milan and peace is achieved
  - Ariel and Caliban are released
  - Alonso finds out his son is alive

Your notes

Loss and betrayal


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Loss and betrayal

The Tempest explores the lack of freedom brought about as a result of loss of power or identity. The play explores characters' reactions to loss and, in particular, the way this leads to further loss and betrayal. The **protagonist**, Prospero, learns by the end of the play that regaining one's own power is often at the expense of others losing their **autonomy**.

Knowledge and evidence:

- In the **exposition**, Shakespeare suggests, through the storm, that a sense of loss can set in motion an array of chaotic events
- Shakespeare presents characters who react strongly to loss in their lives:
  - The noblemen on the ship almost lose their lives trying to hold on to their sense of control, despite being on unfamiliar territory
  - Alonso believes he has lost his son, Ferdinand, and begins a search across the island
- Prospero's loss of power and position as Duke of Milan represents his loss of identity and is presented as the reason for the conflict

- The island setting represents isolation and loss of freedom for those on it:
  - Ariel's obedience is presented sympathetically, to convey their lack of identity and control
  - Prospero and Miranda are exiled on the island
  - As soon as Ferdinand arrives, Prospero imprisons him and limits his **autonomy**
  - Ariel loses their freedom to two settlers arriving on the island: Sycorax, and then, Prospero:
- Caliban is an explicit representation of loss as he is humiliated and insulted throughout the play:
  - His violent reaction to his loss of freedom on the island (which he believes was once his) creates conflict with the **protagonist**, building much of the **tension**
  - His attack on Miranda and conspiracy with Stephano create further mistrust amongst the characters on the isolated island
- Both Prospero and Caliban represent powerful individuals who clash over an intense desire to regain what they have lost:
  - He believes Prospero has corrupted him: "You taught me the language, and my benefit did not come from it. I know how to swear."
  - Prospero's oppressive control of the other characters is motivated by a desire to regain his self-respect and identity as powerful leader
  - Caliban is dehumanised, called a "monster" and treated like an animal, which he sees as a betrayal of the former alliance he and Prospero shared:

What is Shakespeare's intention?

- Shakespeare challenges ideas about **colonisation** by illustrating loss of freedom as a result of powerful invaders
- Shakespeare comments on violent reactions to loss of dignity and **autonomy**
- Shakespeare explores suffering as a result of loss of identity



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

Your notes

Characters

It is useful to consider each character as representing a function in the play. Understanding Shakespeare's purpose for each character will help produce sophisticated analysis. Interpreting the play's ideas by considering how each character may represent an idea or a sub-group in society, and how characters oppose each other or react to each other, is crucial.

Below you will find character profiles of:

- Prospero
- Miranda
- Ariel
- Caliban

Other characters:

- Antonio
- Ferdinand
- Stephano
- Boatswain

Prospero


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Prospero

- Prospero is the former and rightful Duke of Milan, betrayed and exiled to the island by his brother Antonio, with the help of Alonso, the King of Naples
- Prospero and his daughter, Miranda, were set adrift and swept ashore on the island:
  - Gonzalo helped Prospero take his books from Milan
  - With the help of these books, Prospero becomes a powerful sorcerer and takes control of the inhabitants of the island
- Prospero is introduced as a bitter character, seeking vengeance
- His strong sense of betrayal leads him to control other characters as he chooses:
  - He locks Caliban in a cave after his attack on Miranda
  - Prospero puts his daughter to sleep when he wishes to hide something from her
  - He releases Ariel from a curse and uses this to enslave them
  - He and Caliban were once close but are now bitter enemies:
- Prospero's character can be described as **omnipotent**:
  - He is able to listen in on other characters and create visions and illusions
  - He has a magic garment and staff
- Critics argue Prospero represents Shakespeare as a playwright:
  - In the final speech, Prospero asks the audience to release him from the illusions he creates through the drama
  - He throws his books in the sea and asks for applause to set him free
- Prospero's development in the play conveys themes of justice and power, particularly in the context of Prospero as a settler and a betrayed duke
- Prospero is presented as knowledgeable, yet misguided by a desire for revenge and control
- His manipulation of the more vulnerable characters in the play (Miranda, Ferdinand, Ariel and Caliban) make him a flawed **protagonist**
- Nevertheless, in the **resolution**, Prospero redeems himself, relinquishing control and his magic "art" and reconciling with his enemies:
  - In this way, Prospero represents mercy and accountability
  - He admits that it is more difficult but is virtuous to forgive rather than seek vengeance

Your notes

Examiner Tips and Tricks

Your exam paper will contain an extract that will hold some significance to the play as a whole. Examiners will always award the highest marks to those students who refer to

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

plot and character beyond just the extract. Think of the extract as a springboard to the rest of the play, and take a whole-text approach to writing your essay.

In practice, this means it is very successful to reference other parts of the play that relate to the extract, and even better if they contrast with the ideas or characterisation that Shakespeare is presenting in the chosen extract. So think: does Shakespeare present this character differently in other parts of the play? Do we see any character development? What ideas is he exploring when showing this contrast? You don't always need to use quotations to show these changes, with the exam board suggesting that "looking at contrasts and parallels in characters and situations at different points in the text" is just as successful.

Your notes

Miranda


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Miranda

- Miranda is Prospero's daughter
- As she has been on the island since she was three years old, she knows little of the outside world:
  - Shakespeare characterises Miranda this way to present her as isolated
  - Her knowledge is limited, and she is sheltered and controlled by her father
- In the **exposition** audiences see Prospero manipulate his daughter by forcing sleep upon her in order to hide information:
  - His dialogue to Miranda suggests he is a protective father, yet this is manifested in manipulative control
- Through the character of Miranda, The Tempest can be viewed as a conventional **comedy**:

- Caliban's wish to couple with her so as to "people" the island with their offspring highlights the theme of **colonisation**
- Nevertheless, it is dictated by her father
- She and Ferdinand are left on the island with Caliban, suggesting an **ambiguous** future
- Her sexuality creates conflict in the play:
- Her father controls and tricks her love interest, Ferdinand, thwarting their relationship
- Her marriage in the **resolution** ends the play positively:

Your notes

Ariel



Ariel

- Ariel is a nymph or spirit who represents the theme of magic and illusion
- In the **exposition**, audiences are told that Ariel was cursed by the witch, Sycorax (a former settler on the island), and trapped inside a tree
- Ariel is indebted to Prospero after he released the spirit from the curse:
  - Ariel serves Prospero
  - The first task audiences see Ariel complete for Prospero is the creation of the storm
- No other character in the play can see Ariel apart from Prospero
- The spirit is not assigned a gender in the play, although productions over time vary their presentation of Ariel as male or female
- Ariel is presented as a vulnerable and loyal spirit, a victim of Prospero's manipulative power:

- Prospero promises Ariel that he will release the spirit from servitude once his plans come to fruition
- In the **resolution**, Ariel's release provides a sense of **cathartic** restoration of order



Your notes

Caliban



Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Caliban

- Caliban, the orphaned son of Sycorax, is left alone on the island with the invisible spirits until Prospero and Miranda arrive
- Caliban symbolises a native, an inhabitant of a strange land:
  - Through his character, Shakespeare explores the idea of knowledge and culture
- Caliban, as the **exposition** explains, was taken in by Prospero and they shared knowledge:
  - Caliban teaches Prospero about the land and how to survive
  - Prospero teaches Caliban sophisticated language
- Caliban is enslaved and trapped in a cave after he tries to sexually assault Miranda:
  - Audiences are told he wishes to make Miranda his wife so they can rule the island together
- The vicious conflict between Caliban and Prospero forms much of the conflict in the plot:
  - Prospero and Caliban are presented as worthy adversaries
  - Their **derogatory** insults convey their strong hatred of each other
- Through the characterisation of Caliban, Shakespeare highlights issues regarding **colonisation**:

- Caliban expresses his sense of oppression and betrayal
- He is afraid of Prospero's power
- He plots with Stephano to overthrow Prospero and brutally murder him

- Caliban, who is described as a monster and a savage, is presented sympathetically:
  - The scene is **comedic**, yet full of **pathos**, as Caliban becomes drunk and is humiliated
  - When he immediately swears allegiance to Stephano because of his new experience with alcohol, audiences witness cultural differences at play:

Your notes

Examiner Tips and Tricks

Consider characters as serving independent functions which drive the themes of the plot. In The Tempest, Shakespeare uses characters to highlight different elements of society, particularly how characters have a huge influence on each other's emotions throughout the play.

Other characters

Antonio


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Antonio

- Antonio is Prospero's younger brother who secretly plotted to overthrow Prospero and take his place as Duke of Milan
- Antonio owes a debt to Alonso, King of Naples, for his help in the plot and hopes to be free of this if Sebastian becomes King of Naples in his place

- His character represents the theme of betrayal and power:
  - He is scheming and deceitful
  - He attempts to kill Alonso while he sleeps

Your notes

Ferdinand



Ferdinand

- Ferdinand, son of Alonso, King of Naples, is separated from the others when the ship is wrecked:
  - This leaves him vulnerable to Prospero and Ariel's magic
- His role in the play is Miranda's thwarted love interest:
  - He is led to Miranda and falls in love with her
- Prospero decides to test him and sets him to work, denying him access to Miranda other than for brief moments:
  - His love for her is presented as strong and pure
- In the **resolution**, Ferdinand and Miranda are married:
  - He represents the man Prospero accepts as his daughter's husband instead of Caliban

Stephano



Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Stephano

- Stephano, Alonso's butler, washes up on the island already in a drunken state
- He and his friend, Trinculo, befriend Caliban who makes them feel safer on the strange island:
  - When Stephano shares his alcohol, Caliban believes he is a god
  - He enjoys Caliban's admiration but is aware this is unjust and diminishes Caliban's dignity
- He and Caliban conspire to overthrow Prospero

Boatswain



Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Boatswain

Your notes

- The boatswain, in charge of the ship, appears in Act I Scene I and in Act V Scene I
- He is described as frustrated with the noblemen for ignoring their instructions during the storm
- In the **resolution**, he awakes from a long sleep, unaware of events which have transpired on the island



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.



Your notes

Writer's Methods and Techniques

The best responses don't limit their analysis to individual words and phrases. Examiners are really looking for analysis of Shakespeare's overall aims so try to take a "whole-text" approach and consider the effects of the writer's methods and techniques. Each of the below topics do just that:

- **Form**
- **Structure**
- **Language**

Form

The Tempest is a Shakespearean **comedy**. It is important that the examiner knows from your essay that you understand the conventions of **comedy** and aspects of it which inform your analysis of the play. It is also worth exploring the elements of this play as a **romantic comedy**. This produces a more conceptualised answer which takes into account the methods and purpose of Shakespeare as a playwright.

Shakespearean comedies usually consist of:

- A setting which incorporates a celebration or festival, often in idyllic locations:
  - In this way, The Tempest differs somewhat as it does not include a festival
  - However, it takes place on a small, magical island
- A love dilemma or triangle which takes the **protagonists** on a journey of mistakes and misunderstandings:
  - The Tempest's romantic triangle involves Miranda, Ferdinand and Prospero
  - Prospero tricks and schemes, listens in on their conversations and controls their relationship although they are unaware
  - **Dramatic irony** creates humour as audiences hear Prospero's asides and soliloquies detailing his plots as he listens in on characters
- **Juxtaposition** of scenes to present emotional ups and downs, disorder to order:
  - In The Tempest, Prospero and Ariel create disorder with their magical arts
  - Those with authority are shown to be vulnerable outside of their domain
  - As the noblemen are shipwrecked and wash up on different parts of the island, they are presented as out of control
  - These scenes are juxtaposed with magical illusions, songs and drunken celebrations
- A comic villain who plans to derail the happiness of the hero or heroine:

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.


Your notes

- In this play, Caliban is the vengeful villain who wishes to derail Miranda and Prospero's control of the island
- The theme of human folly, trickery and gullibility is shown through **slapstick comedy**, sexual jokes, **satire** and **parody**:
  - Characters such as the drunk Trinculo and Stephano create humour through their witty banter and clumsy, physical arguments
- Characters such as clowns, fools and others in disguise:
  - In this play, Prospero makes himself invisible with a magic garment
  - Ariel is an invisible spirit who creates illusions and casts spells
- The use of **dramatic irony** so the audience laughs at a character's ignorance:
  - The scene in which they elaborately feign innocence after drawing their swords on the sleeping Alonso is humorous to the audience, as they know Ariel has tricked them
  - In The Tempest, Antonio and Sebastian are exposed as duplicitous when Ariel tricks them:
- A comic **resolution** where misunderstandings are clarified:
  - Prospero releases Caliban and Ariel from his control
  - Prospero forgives his enemies and they reconcile
  - Peace between Milan and Naples comes as a result of the marriage
  - The Duke of Milan gives the title back to Prospero
- A **resolution** which provides a sense of **catharsis**, often ending with a marriage:
  - The Tempest ends with a happy marriage between Miranda and Ferdinand
  - Prospero leaves the island and returns to Milan

A **Jacobean** audience member would have been well acquainted with **comedy**, and Shakespearean **comedy** in particular. This means a contemporary audience member would be expecting these plays to conform to the **conventions of comedy**, as listed above.

When the audience knows something that a character in a play doesn't, it's called **dramatic irony**. We see moments where Shakespeare uses Prospero's plotting or Ariel's magic as a method of creating **dramatic irony**, and this creates humour. As audiences watch, they are already aware that characters are being fooled.

Try to show the examiner that you understand that the audience would sometimes feel satisfied or amused, or show judgement or pity for characters as each scene is shown, and that drives home messages that Shakespeare wishes to convey. Make sure you highlight that Shakespeare uses this dynamic for dramatic effect too.

Structure

The structure of a comedy

Classical comedy follows conventions of Greek drama. The main features are:

- Unity of time, place and action
- Events which mimic everyday life
- A plot which ridicules and satirises human folly or vices


Your notes

Shakespearean comedies generally follow the same five-part structure:

- **Exposition:** the play begins with a scene full of tension; often conflict is **foreshadowed**:
  - In The Tempest, the play opens with a ship battling a storm
  - The sailors argue with the noblemen who get in the way, suggesting a reversal of roles
  - Prospero and Ariel have created the storm as a way to seek revenge
  - Miranda is the subject of Prospero's magic as well
- **Rising Action:** the implicit conflict is developed as the characters are tricked and deceived:
  - Prospero begins to control the noblemen as they wash up on different parts of the island
  - Prospero and Caliban's resentful relationship manifests in bitter disputes and deceits
  - Ariel protests the way Prospero has manipulated them into slavery
  - Ferdinand is led to Miranda by magic and they fall in love
  - Prospero tests Ferdinand and Miranda, with them unaware
- **Turning Point:** the climax of the play is signalled with chaos and an **impasse**:
  - Caliban plots to murder Prospero, with the help of Stephano
  - Prospero begins to see the distress he is causing Miranda and Ferdinand
  - Antonio and Sebastian are entrenched in their own plot to murder Alonso
- **Falling Action:** the play's misunderstandings are revealed:
  - Ariel punishes Antonio and Sebastian with a stark warning
  - Prospero reflects on his actions and prepares to give up magic
  - Prospero forgives Antonio for betraying him
- **Resolution:** problems are resolved and the play ends in marriage:
  - Prospero throws his books into the sea, denouncing magic
  - Antonio returns the dukedom to Prospero
  - The marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand brings peace to Naples and Milan
  - Ariel and Caliban are released

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.



Examiner Tips and Tricks

It is always good to refer to other parts of the play in your answer to gain the highest marks. Even better than just a reference or a quotation is to refer to the section of the play from the perspective of a **comedy**: "In the **rising action** of the **comedy**, Shakespeare conveys the way magic causes confusion, which contributes to the humour of the scene as we see the characters' ignorance..."

It is good to trace the development of themes and messages through the methods used at each point of the play. Analysing the way dramatic methods or techniques convey Shakespeare's messages with comedic effect adds marks for analysis of the writer's craft, because you are referring to Shakespeare's use of conventions of **comedy** to present his ideas.



Your notes

Language

It is, of course, important to analyse Shakespeare's use of language in any essay on The Tempest. However, try to see "language" in a broader sense than just the words that Shakespeare uses: it also includes the form and patterns of his language. Moreover, try to take a "whole-text" approach and consider why Shakespeare presents - through his use of language - the ideas he wants to explore in the play. Below you will find revision materials on:

- Poetry and Prose
- Symbolism

Poetry and Prose

Shakespeare shifts his characters' dialogue from **prose** to **verse** to indicate the mood in a scene, as well as the characters' social status. In The Tempest, much of the dialogue is in **Iambic pentameter**. Lower status or comic characters almost always speak in prose, whereas those with power and knowledge speak in verse. It is worth noting that Caliban speaks in **verse** using sophisticated language to represent an intellectual character, despite his savage appearance and lack of authority.

Blank verse

- **Blank verse** consists of unrhymed lines of ten syllables, although it does not always exactly fit that pattern
- **Blank verse** does not necessarily rhyme, but lines have a regular rhythm
- Typically in Shakespeare plays, the use of **verse** represents a character's emotions, often employed during an intimate speech or **soliloquy**:
  - His complex sentence structures and sophisticated **soliloquy** present him as an intellectual and powerful character
  - **Iambic pentameter** in Caliban's speeches show his sense of outrage
  - Prospero speaks in **verse** when he relates his betrayal to Miranda:

Rhymed verse

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- **Rhymed verse** consists of sets of **rhyming couplets**: two successive lines that rhyme with each other at the end of the line
- Most notably, in the **resolution** Prospero delivers an **epilogue** in which he makes use of **rhyming couplets:** "Now my charms are all o'erthrown,/And what strength I have 's mine own":
  - Prospero's final speech is poetic and sophisticated, indicative of his wisdom and power
- Ariel and the other spirits use **rhyming couplets** in their enchanting songs:
  - Ariel's rhymes signify an innocent quality to their nature, contributing to the magical mood: "Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell./Hark, now I hear them, ding dong bell"

Prose

- **Prose** consists of unrhymed lines with no pattern or rhythm
- Shakespeare uses **prose** for dialogue of a comedic or a lower class character
- Shakespeare uses **prose** in The Tempest for Trinculo in particular:
  - Trinculo can be considered the **fool** or jester in the play
  - He dresses up, drinks too much and provides light relief
  - He delivers **comedic** lines as he argues with Stephano and is tricked by Ariel

Symbolism

Man and nature

- The title of the play and the opening scene introduce the symbolism of nature and the power of man:
  - The word "tempest" means "storm"
  - This **foreshadows** the turbulent and chaotic events about to be presented as the story unfolds
- In this first scene, the sailors challenge the noblemen and king:
  - They explain that nature does not observe man-made social hierarchies and drowns kings as easily as lowly sailors
  - This **ironic** scene conveys man's vulnerability in the face of nature
- Miranda, who has lived on the island for many years, shows her fear of nature's power:
  - She describes the "wild waters": "The sky, it seems would pour down stinking pitch"
- While Prospero symbolises the power of man, he is aided by supernatural spirits and magical arts:
  - He repeatedly refers to "charms" and magical "arts" and speaks with the spirits
  - Although he gains control of the island he learns by the **resolution** that human power is limited by emotions



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Caliban symbolises the native inhabitant's connection to nature:
  - He speaks of the gods of nature, he teaches Prospero about the land and he is described as animalistic
  - Caliban is insulted for his connections to barbarism: he is a "demi-devil" and "puppy-headed monster"
  - In Act III Scene II, he describes the noises of the island which "give delight and hurt not", highlighting his close connection to nature
  - He believes Stephano when he says he used to be the "Man i'th'Moon"
- Shakespeare presents **foil** characters to emphasise conflicts between man and nature:
  - Caliban's wild savagery contrasts with Miranda's civilised and tame nature

Knowledge and power

- It is made clear to audiences in the **exposition** that Prospero's magical powers were learned from his vast library of books
- Prospero uses these powers to gain control and submit some of the inhabitants to servitude:
  - However, by the **resolution**, Prospero's wisdom overrides his desire to control
- Caliban's instructions to Stephano to steal Prospero's books and "brain him" by hitting him in the "skull" suggest Caliban knows where Prospero's power lies
- In the **rising action**, Caliban expresses his outrage that the knowledge they shared with each other has been unfairly beneficial to Prospero:
  - His **exclamatory language** cursing Prospero conveys his outrage: "my profit on 't/Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/For learning me your language!"
- Symbolically, the game of chess in Act V Scene I could allude to the way Prospero has "captured" the king, Alonso, and won back his dukedom:
  - The chess game, played by Miranda and Ferdinand, when Prospero reveals to Alonso his son is still alive, could represent Prospero's mind-play
  - Prospero misuses his knowledge to gain full control, exemplified in this scene where he enjoys showing his power off to Alonso
  - His power is manifested both in his superior knowledge that Alonso's son is alive and that he has married them unbeknownst to the king
- The political **subversion** in the play is disguised within the **comedic** relief:
  - Prospero's magical "arts" control and subvert figures of authority
  - His power makes them vulnerable and exposed, on unfamiliar territory, as they become victims of nature and the supernatural
- In the **resolution**, Prospero denounces his magic and relinquishes control
- He does this by symbolically throwing his books in the ocean: "I'll drown my book"
- It is argued that Prospero represents Shakespeare himself:



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- The Tempest is Shakespeare's final play
- The books could represent Shakespeare's words and the power of drama

- Prospero's magical garment symbolises changes in his attitude to power:
  - The first is in Act I Scene II when he tells Miranda to "pluck my magic garment from me. So, lie there, my art-- Wipe thou thine eyes"
  - He takes it off in Act V Scene I to symbolise his rejection of powerful magic
  - Ariel helps to dress him in a duke's robe, which is suggestive of their influence on his decisions
  - It is argued that the garment is a cloak, such as an academic or sorcerer's gown
  - Prospero takes it off twice in the play:



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

Your notes

Interpretations

AO5 assesses your ability to understand different ways of reading and interpreting texts. Those different readings can take different forms, from interpretations discussed by different members of the peer group in your class, to reading and utilising published critical material, to watching and analysing different productions of plays.

There are numerous ways to explore "different interpretations" to meet the AO5 criterion and you must explore a range of secondary readings to supplement your understanding of the text. These can include:

- **Exploring critics**
- **Interpretations over time**
- **Dramatisations**

Examiner Tips and Tricks

OCR's definition of different interpretations is quite broad and could mean any of the following:

- A student's own alternative readings
- The views of classmates (the best way to credit these in an academic essay would be: "Others have suggested that…")
- Views from academics in literary criticism
- Theoretical perspectives (literary critical theory)
- Critical perspectives over time
- Readings provided by productions
- Stage and screen adaptations of works

Exploring critics

Different critics will offer varied insights and interpretations of The Tempest and citations will lend credibility and authority to your analysis. Referencing well-known critics demonstrates that your interpretation is grounded in literary criticism. It will also enhance the validity of your argument. By citing multiple critics you can present a more comprehensive and balanced analysis and demonstrate the different range of perspectives and interpretations surrounding the play.

Examiner Tips and Tricks

You should try to locate two very good critical essays that cover many approaches to exploring "different interpretations". These types of essays are excellent models to

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

help you explore how to use one or several of the above approaches in order to demonstrate the skills required for AO5.



Your notes

Below are some notable critics who have commented on The Tempest:

Frank Kermode (1919–2010)

- Frank Kermode, a British traditionalist critic, explains The Tempest in relation to its depictions of the natural world in contrast to the civilised world
- Kermode considers Caliban the "representative of Nature uncontrolled by Art"
- His savagery is the subject of much of Kermode's analysis:
  - He notes that despite Prospero's teachings, Caliban can "only abuse the gift of speech"
  - Kermode sees Caliban as a **foil** to Prospero's civilised "arts" and education which has powerful restorative qualities
- Kermode argues a traditional and **empirical** perspective:
  - He takes at face value the description of Calibian as a "monster"
  - For Kermode, his characterisation is humorous and **ironic** and pushes the "bounds of credibility"
- Kermode describes Sycorax, the witch who was Caliban's mother, as a "practitioner of natural magic" who can "command, as a rule, only devils and the lowest orders of spirits"
- This places Caliban and Sycorax in direct contrast to Prospero, who Kermode perceives as the epitome of knowledge, virtue and sophistication

Neil Bowen (1953–)

- Bowen's focus on the socio-political context of the play has led to arguments and debates regarding the characterisation of Prospero as **subversive**:
  - Bowen suggests Shakespeare challenges **Jacobean** England's social structures through the voice of Prospero
- Bowen argues that the boatswain's frustration as he orders the noblemen below deck challenges the authority of the **The Great Chanin of Being**
- He argues that this presents social hierarchies as "an unnatural construct and one which, crucially, is vulnerable to outside forces"
- Bowen considers that the play could be "obliquely criticising King James":
  - Bowen argues that the storm symbolises times of crisis and the play presents a guide to "wise leadership"
  - He describes Prospero as having learned the virtue of "mercy and reconciliation" by the **resolution**
- He argues that the play's characters are representative of the way power and authority can be used and abused "exposing fault lines" in the social order

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- In his work "The Art of Drama", Bowen suggests that the play offers "an ambiguous picture of colonialism and of the position of women in society":
  - He describes Prospero in this context as a "subtle but arch Machiavellian.. using his daughter as part of his political game"
  - **Machiavellian** theory, that the end justifies the means, can be applied to Prospero's plotting as he manipulates events as a means to a just end



Your notes

Malcolm Hebron (1966–)

- Malcolm Hebron, lecturer and director of drama at Winchester College, explains the **binary opposites** at play in The Tempest in terms of its tragic and comedic elements
- He discusses the connection between a Magus and Prospero, in that they are wise and powerful:
  - Magus represents a force of good and evil in one being
  - A magus uses magic to right injustices
- Hebron says of Prospero: "His aim is to bring his enemies to realise their evil actions":
  - In this context, he considers the storm as necessary to clear impurities
  - He perceives Prospero as a character who embodies the idea of "impossible purity" in the world, perhaps reinforced by Gonzalo's **Utopian** visions
- Hebron argues that Prospero's rejection of magic in the **resolution** does not come from guilt, but from a desire to resume his "worldly duties"



Examiner Tips and Tricks

Critical essays often provide historical and contextual background for their interpretations. Exploring these essays can deepen your understanding of the play by placing it within its cultural, historical and literary context.

Interpretations over time

Interpretations of The Tempest have evolved significantly over time, reflecting shifts in cultural and literary perspectives. Below are some examples of how interpretations of the play have evolved over time. These are explored in relation to some schools of critical reading.



Examiner Tips and Tricks

When considering interpretations, you need to consider the text from alternative viewpoints, but in relation to the question. Reading widely around the text is therefore crucial to this, so that you are able to critically assess the extent to which the

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

interpretations have value, as there will always be ongoing debates about the play and its themes and ideas.


Your notes

Early Interpretations: 17th Century

- In the 17th century, when the play was first performed, costumes in early productions suggest the play reflects the era of **colonialism** across the British Empire
- A pamphlet from 1610 titled "A Discovery of the Bermudas" is said to be the inspiration for the play
- The play was interpreted as a religious **allegory** as it conveys the ideology that sin redeemed leads to virtue:
  - Prospero relates how the virtuous path of forgiveness is the "rarer" path
- Early audiences would consider the way the play reinforces Christian values of forgiveness and salvation, perhaps seeing it as **didactic**:
  - Prospero's magic may have been seen as sinful to Christian audiences
- Some critics viewed The Tempest as an **allegory** which paid tribute to art and drama:
  - As this was Shakespeare's final play, Prospero's speech in the **epilogue** was thought to explicitly reveal the playwright's surrogate role

Romantic Interpretations: 18th Century

- Romantic interpretations consider the play in terms of the theme of regeneration which is promoted by Ferdinand and Miranda's love
- Traditionally, Ferdinand would be portrayed as heroic and strong, bearing logs for Prospero in order to win Miranda's hand
- Romantic criticisms consider the associations of the play with classic romances:
  - The play includes features of mythical romance, such as kings and princesses, love trials, dreams, **lyrical verse** and supernatural creatures
- Romantic interpretations also consider the play in light of its comic conventions:
  - Its fantastical and romantic elements create a calm and gentle mood
  - The marriage at the end resolves conflict and brings peace and order
  - In this way, Prospero is portrayed as a protective and gracious father

Jungian Interpretations: 20th Century

- The Tempest lends itself to psychological readings in that it explores repressed desires and oppression:
  - They appeal to his conscience, which is shown as influential
  - In particular, Ariel and Caliban represent **antagonists** to the **protagonist**, Prospero
  - Ariel, loyal and good, places pressure on Prospero in a gentle way:

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Caliban pressures him with violence and aggression, appealing to his baser self
- In this way, the play can be seen as examining the growth of the human spirit

- The Tempest explores the contrasts between rational thought and emotions:
  - Prospero plots his vengeance carefully, like a chess game, relying on books and art
  - Caliban expresses his betrayal in a primal way, seeking his desires impulsively and violently
- A Jungian interpretation sees the characters of Ariel and Caliban as "causal principles", vehicles whereby Prospero's ego can open and find his true "Self"
- According to Jung, the additional risk Prospero faces when protecting Miranda from Caliban heightens his self-development, in turn allowing him to affect physical reality
- Prospero's characterisation, as a bitter and vengeful man who is diminished by betrayal and exile, presents him as out of control while still believing he is in control



Your notes

Post-colonial Interpretations: 20th Century

- **Post-colonial** interpretations of The Tempest began during the decolonisation of the British Empire between the 1960s and 1980s
- **Post-colonial** criticism explores the treatment of Caliban in terms of racial identity and equality:
  - Such interpretations consider how inhabitants of new lands are seen as dangerous or barbaric, termed "the Other" in comparison to the "Western Self"
- **Post-colonial** debates argue that Prospero's oppressive obstruction to Caliban's desire and his choice to marry Miranda to Ferdinand, is discriminatory and treats Caliban as "the Other":
  - Notably, Caliban's desire to marry Miranda is in order to "people" the island with his sons in order to maintain control
- In these readings, Prospero represents the settler who establishes control of a foreign land through oppressive force

New Historicist Interpretations: 21st Century

- A New Historicist interpretation places the play within its historical and cultural context:
  - Interpretations of The Tempest centre around **subversion** of social constructs
- Critics consider the play in terms of how it exposes problems within authoritative social hierarchies:
  - When the noblemen show their ignorance on board the ship, they represent the fallibility of societal titles in the face of nature
  - This promotes ideas about the power of nature versus man
- New Historicism deals with power struggles within a social system:
  - Debates consider how oppressive power impacts individuals and how they rebel

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- In this way, Ariel and Caliban symbolise the diminished identity of enslaved individuals
- Caliban is said to be an anagram of the word "cannibal" which signifies his role as "the Other" in the play
- Ariel represents the loyal and submissive subject, negotiating for equity



Examiner Tips and Tricks

It is vital that you are able to know how to draw aspects of these critical texts into a broader discussion of how The Tempest could be interpreted. When reading critical texts, you should aim to have two or three ideas or points that you can take away from each one, so that they can inform your own interpretations of the text.

It is also useful that you critically assess the extent to which the interpretations have value and whether the interpretations offered are dominant, emerging or lesser acknowledged interpretations.

Dramatisations

Dramatisations of The Tempest convey different readings and interpretations of the text. Directors and actors make choices regarding performance, setting, costumes and character portrayals, all of which can influence the audience's understanding of the play. There are many different dramatisations of The Tempest which present diverse readings and interpretations of the play. These interpretations shed light on the depth and complexity of the characters, highlighting diverse aspects of their motivations and psychological states.

Examining various productions of The Tempest will enable you to appreciate different interpretations of the characters and themes and how they may have evolved over time, reflecting shifts in society and culture. Below are two examples of different film productions of The Tempest, though you should view a wide range of film and stage performances of the play to help inform your own interpretations.

The Tempest: Derek Jarman (1979)

Derek Jarman adapted the play by adding a **gothic** tone in order to highlight the mysterious and supernatural quality, especially through characters such as Ariel. His adaptation was set in Warwickshire, England, which alters the mood of the island setting considerably.

- Jarman's adaptation picks up on the Victorian fascination with mystery and magic:
  - The lighting vividly contrasts dark and light
  - Prospero's cell is a haunted house
  - The version was described as an "absorbing game of hide and seek"
- Jarman's cinematography includes blue filters and voice-over narration to present scenes of dreams or illusions as fantastical and eerie
- This version cuts scenes and elongates narration of the **exposition**, suggestive of the complex sub-plot and simultaneous events in The Tempest



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Critics largely praised the experimental approach Jarman took with his film adaptation:
  - It has been described as a piece of work which represents queer cinema
  - Baroque hairstyles and Tim Burton-esque costumes emphasise the fantastical quality of the play
  - The marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda takes place amongst dancing sailors and bright lights
- In this version, although **queer** elements are foregrounded, **post-colonial** interpretations of the play are undermined:
  - Jarman cast the roles of Caliban and Sycorax to white actors
  - Caliban's character, played by Jack Birkett, has been likened to Gollum in the Lord of the Rings film, emphasising his characterisation as wild and isolated



Your notes

The Tempest: Julie Taymor (2010)

Julie Taymor, accredited stage director, adapts The Tempest by changing the gender of the protagonist, Prospero, to a female called Prospera, played by Helen Mirren. This adaptation highlights the significance of the remote island setting and Prospera's astrological, ancient powers.

- Taymor's adaptation pays homage to Shakespeare's language, keeping the original dialogue by cutting only a few pieces of verse
- Taymor's gender substitution seems to highlight themes of power:
  - The term "sir" becomes "ma'am" or "dame" and "father" is translated as "mother"
  - In Taymor's film, "the hat and rapier" in Act V Scene I are substituted by a "skirt"
  - Thus, **personal pronouns** and titles referring to Prospero are changed:
  - The plot is altered somewhat as Prospera is presented as the victim of exile because of her witchcraft, having presented a threat to **patriarchal** structures in Milan
  - Here, Prospera exclaims that Antonio accused her of being "A practitioner of the black arts. A demon, not a woman, nay, a witch!"
- In this version, Prospera protects Miranda from what Taymor presents as **misogyny**:
  - In the **resolution**, Miranda's happy marriage with King Alsonso's son results in an alliance between the cities
  - Prospera replaces Antonio as the Duchess of Milan
- Contrary to Jarman's adaptation, this version takes place on an Hawaiian island:
  - The Tempest's various scenes are shown as black lava fields, high cliffs and swamps
  - Critics of the play praise the atmospheric depiction of the exotic setting
- Taymor's film emphasises the island's claustrophobic mood:
  - This adaptation focuses on Prospera's manipulative power which magnetically draws characters toward her and her cell, a cave at the centre of the island

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Critics suggest the cave represents the idea of enlightened characters emerging from the darkness with newfound knowledge

Placing the critical material/reading into a spectrum of critical discourse on The Tempest is an important process. It's vital that you understand that certain trends in interpretation are established within specific geographic, demographic, historical, political, social and literary contexts.



Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

Your notes

Key Quotations

The best way to revise quotations is to group them by character, or theme. Below you will find definitions and analysis of the best quotations, arranged by the following themes:

- **Power and control**
- **Magic and illusion**
- **Loss and betrayal**

Examiner Tips and Tricks

Examiners reward answers which link ideas and themes in the given extract to the rest of the play. A convincing way to do this is to include short quotations or references from elsewhere in The Tempest which show a connection, contrast, or that illustrate thematic or character development. The trick is to show how Shakespeare develops these themes and how they are shown by the end. It is equally valuable to include "paired quotations": two quotations that might not feature in the extract but show these connections, or changes. These paired quotations are marked below, and are great when analysed together.

Power and control


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Power and control

The play centres around the concept of power lost and gained, often due to characters' ability to seize brief moments during which they have control, or by using their knowledge to overpower others. The Tempest challenges **authoritarian** power which oppresses and limits the **autonomy** of others, particularly in the context of invasion.

"What cares these roarers for the name of king?"
Boatswain, The Tempest, Act I Scene I


Your notes

Meaning and context

- In the first scene, during the storm, the boatswain explains to Alonso that the waves do not obey kings
- This introductory scene presents the more knowledgeable sailors who are ignored by the noblemen and King of Naples, Alonso, which contributes to the shipwreck:
  - The captain and boatswain try to navigate the storm and ask the noblemen to stay below which they refuse to do

Analysis

- Shakespeare introduces the theme of power and control in the **exposition**:
  - The storm, which symbolises loss of control, **foreshadows** the play's themes on the disruption of order
  - The storm is created by Prospero to wreak havoc and restore his own power by taking away the power of those on the ship
- This scene mocks the arrogance of the noblemen and **subverts** social order:
  - The sailors deliver orders to the king which is a reversal of roles
  - They explain the limitations of human power and social hierarchy on the sea

Paired Quotations:

"Thy father was the Duke of Milan
A prince of power"
Prospero, The Tempest, Act I Scene II

"And these, mine enemies, are all knit up
In their distractions. They now are in my power"
Prospero, The Tempest, Act III Scene III

Meaning and context

- Prospero tells Miranda, his daughter, that he was the Duke of Milan before they came to the island
- He explains to her that he has used his power to create the storm, but he is justified as he was betrayed by those on the ship

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Later, in the **climax** of the play, Prospero reflects, in an **aside**, that he has full control over the other characters



Your notes

Analysis

- The **third person** reference to himself (as he tells Miranda of his former title) is dramatic:
  - Prospero's self-importance is mocked when Miranda asks him, in reply, if he is not her father
  - This also conveys the theme of power to the audience, presenting leaders as human (simply perceived as fathers to their children)
- The **alliteration** of "Prince" and "Power" highlights ideas regarding human control within social constructs:
  - The line is dramatic, speaking again to the value Prospero attributes to titles
- In the **climax** of the play, Prospero reflects on the consequences of his manipulative actions:
  - He is pleased that he has restored his sense of power now that he controls all events on the island
  - He describes how his "high charms" afford him this power
  - He speaks in a self-congratulatory manner
- The **imagery** of "knit" alludes to the web of deceit he has created:
  - He describes his enemies as tangled up in distractions, which has allowed him to control them

> **"My library**
> **Was dukedom large enough."**
> Prospero, The Tempest, Act I Scene II

Meaning and context

- Here, Prospero explains to Miranda that upon his arrival on the island, his library represented a new sense of personal control
- This line connects Prospero's power to the knowledge gained from his library
- Later in this scene he repeats his love for books and that he values them more than his dukedom

Analysis

- Prospero's **metaphor**, that his library affords him a sense of power, illustrates the play's themes regarding control gained by knowledge
- His repetition that he values his books more than his title contrasts with his actions, making this line **ironic**:

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

- Questions are raised as to the way Prospero uses the knowledge gained through his books to regain his title and wreak revenge on those who took it


Your notes

Paired Quotations:

> **"For I am all the subjects that you have,**
> **Which was first mine own king"**
> Caliban, The Tempest, Act I Scene II

> **"No name of magistrate.**
> **Letters should not be known"**
> Gonzalo, The Tempest, Act II Scene I

Meaning and context

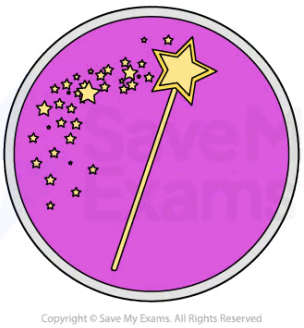
- In this scene, Caliban expresses frustration that Prospero has taken control of the island
- He tells Prospero that he is the only subject in his "kingdom" as nobody else lives on the island
- He reminds Prospero that he was once "king" of the island
- Later in the play, Gonzalo describes how he would rule if he was in power:
  - He lists a range of things he would declare as worthless, such as the power of authority to control men

Analysis

- Caliban uses language which presents him as able to communicate on an equal level to Prospero:
  - The **metaphor** of a kingdom describes social hierarchies which are foreign to the culture of the island
  - In this way he is able to use a **semantic field** which Prospero understands
  - This presents him as intelligent and powerless, purely due to Prospero's oppressive control
- Gonzalo's character contributes to the theme of power and control in the play:
  - He describes a **Utopian** society without authority or ranking
  - In this way he raises questions about social order and **authoritarian** control

Magic and illusion

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.


Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Magic and illusion

Your notes

Shakespearean comedies, such as The Tempest, revolve around thwarted plans and romantic dilemmas, raising questions, via trickery and illusion, about what is real and what is false. Comedies, however, resolve these problems by the end with a wedding or marriage. The Tempest ends with marriage too. As well as this, in the final scene, Prospero pleads to the audience to release him from a spell so as to resolve any illusions witnessed in the play.

Paired Quotations:

> **"I have with such provision of my art**
> **So safely ordered"**
> Prospero, The Tempest, Act I Scene II

> **"I must obey. His art is of such power it would control my dam's god"**
> Caliban, The Tempest, Act I Scene II

Meaning and context

- Prospero tells Miranda he has full control over his magic, which he calls his "art":
  - He says he can ensure nobody on the ship was harmed in the storm
- Later in the scene, Caliban refers to Prospero's magic as so powerful that he could enslave the gods Caliban worships (gods of nature)

Analysis

- Shakespeare shows Prospero's arrogance as he believes he has power to control human life against the power of nature:
  - This is **ironic**, as later in the play, Prospero realises his power is limited and has consequences
- He refers to magic as "art", here and elsewhere in the play:

- This is indicative of magic as learned knowledge (an art form)
- His reference to his books and library connects magic to knowledge
- Shakespeare often challenges **Jacobean** attitudes to magic, presenting it as knowledge gained from particular disciplines

- However, Caliban's attitude to Prospero's magic illustrates the dangerous power magic holds:
  - His comparison of Prospero's power with those of the island gods raises questions about abuse of power, in particular, regarding **colonisation**
  - His short sentence highlights his feelings of resignation

> **"Be not afeared; the isle is full of noises,**
> **Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not."**
> Caliban, The Tempest, Act III Scene II

Meaning and context

- In this scene Caliban reassures Stephano and Trinculo that the island is full of spirits but they are harmless
- Here, Caliban refers to the mysterious music they hear
- Ariel, the invisible nymph, has created an illusion and sings in order to lure the men

Analysis

- Caliban's speech is rich in **imagery** and he speaks in unrhymed **iambic pentameter**:
  - This in itself conveys the theme of illusion as he is described as a monster and a savage
  - Here, audiences see Caliban's love of the island and his comfort and familiarity with it
  - The **sibilance** of "sound" and "sweet airs" contributes to the magical quality of the scene
  - Caliban's poetic speech presents him as a sensitive and intelligent character:
- Caliban conveys the theme of illusion and magic positively in this scene which provides light relief

Paired Quotations:

>

Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.

"As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;"
Prospero, The Tempest, Act IV Scene I

"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on"
Prospero, The Tempest, Act IV Scene I

Meaning and context

- In the **resolution**, Prospero relinquishes control and surrenders his magical powers
- He explains that the characters and events are all spirits which have disappeared
- He ends his **soliloquy** stating that the play is similar to life: it is **transitory** and fades away like spirits in the air

Analysis

- Prospero's repetition of "into air, into thin air" emphasises the illusory nature of the characters
- The **verb** "melted" connotes to a vanishing or changing substance, which in this case alludes to the characters in the play
- The speech ends with a **metaphor** comparing life to a dream, in that it is short and fleeting
- The **imagery** highlights themes regarding man's illusion of power and control

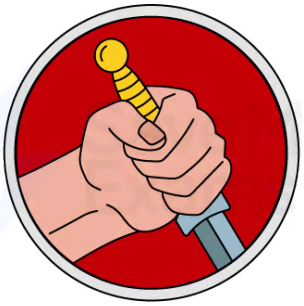
Examiner Tips and Tricks

Don't include quotations that have nothing to do with the question. As tempting as it might be if you have them memorised, examiners really dislike when students "shoehorn in irrelevant quotations". This can affect your overall mark since your response can become less focused. Use the evidence to support your argument. Evidence can be reference to language, as well as dramatic devices.

Loss and betrayal

Your notes

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd.



Copyright © Save My Exams. All Rights Reserved

Loss and betrayal

Your notes

The Tempest presents the reactions of characters dealing with loss and betrayal on a small island. The setting contributes to a claustrophobic mood as characters lose and try to regain identity and dignity in the context of schemes and secrets. Shakespeare illustrates the way characters' feelings of betrayal and loss can lead to equally treacherous actions.

> **"By foul play, as thou sayst, were we heaved thence,"**
> Prospero, The Tempest, Act I Scene II

Meaning and context

- In this scene, Prospero tells Miranda that the reason they came to the island is because he was betrayed and had his dukedom taken by his brother
- His reference to "foul play" suggests Prospero views betrayal as corrupt and unjust

Analysis

- Prospero's use of the phrase "foul play" hints at the deception behind betrayal
- His use of the **dynamic verb** "heaved" emphasises the physical and violent exile to the island
- This line is **ironic** as the audience witness, as he speaks, Prospero engaging in foul play by creating a storm to crash the ship

> **"And then I loved thee,**
> **And show'd thee all the qualities o' th' isle,"**
> Caliban, The Tempest, Act I Scene II


Your notes

> **"brain him,**
> **Having first seized his books, or with a log**
> **Batter his skull"**
> Caliban, The Tempest, Act III Scene II

Meaning and context

- Caliban expresses his sense of betrayal and loss as he tells Prospero he once loved him and helped him survive on the island
- Later, in Act III Scene III, Caliban plots with Stephano to betray Prospero:
  - First, he is to reduce Prospero's power by taking his books
  - Then he is to hit him over the head
  - He gives Stephano a list of instructions:

Analysis

- Shakespeare develops the theme of betrayal in the **exposition** showing audiences Caliban's distress in an **emotive** line:
  - Informing the audience that Caliban loves Prospero and helps him thrive when he first arrives on the island presents Caliban in a sympathetic light
  - This explains Caliban's disgruntlement under Prospero's assumed control
- Shakespeare presents the dangerous consequences of Caliban's strong sense of loss and betrayal in Act III Scene III:
  - His violent language vividly illustrates the consequences of betrayal
  - Caliban instructs Stephano to first take away his knowledge before hitting him on the head
  - Caliban fervently lists all the ways Stephano and Trinculo can kill Prospero:
  - The **pun** within the phrase "brain him" is humorous:

Paired Quotations:

> **"You are three men of sin, whom Destiny,**
> **That hath to instrument this lower world"**
> Ariel, The Tempest, Act III Scene III

© 2025 Save My Exams, Ltd. | Get more and ace your exams at savemyexams.com

> **"The rarer action is**
> **In virtue than in vengeance"**
> Prospero, The Tempest, Act V Scene I



Your notes

Meaning and context

- In the **climax**, Ariel confronts Sebastian, Alonso and Antonio who draw their swords
- Ariel tells the noblemen they are sinful for bringing violence and duplicity to the island
- Later, in the play's **resolution**, Prospero admits that it is better to be merciful and forgive than to seek revenge

Analysis

- Ariel's speech is earnest and sophisticated and uses **religious language** and **abstract nouns**:
  - The capitalisation of "Destiny" highlights the idea of inevitable accountability as the men are told that it was their fate to come to the island
  - Ariel hints at the men's fate, which consists of earthly consequences for their immorality:
- Ariel alludes in this speech to the noblemen's uncivilised and inhuman nature:
  - This is **ironic:** the noblemen think the island is savage
- Prospero's **religious language** in the final scene mirrors Ariel's here, perhaps suggesting the nymph has influenced Prospero
- The **alliteration** of "vengeance" and "virtue" associates the play's theme of betrayal and loss with the idea of morality and compassion



Examiner Tips and Tricks

For your exam, you are not expected to learn dozens of quotations by heart. Although examiners do reward the use of memorised quotations in your essay, you will also be rewarded for your ability to mention plot points from various points of the play. These are called "textual references", and do not have to include direct quotations. Try to remember key words from the quotations to embed the most significant words in your answer.

Therefore, it is better to learn a few quotations - and their wider significance - really well, than lots of random quotations: you will not be awarded more marks for more quotations.

The quotations above have all been chosen as they cover a good range of themes that Shakespeare explores in The Tempest.