

# Themes in *The Tempest*

This resource is designed as a reference guide for teachers. We have listed the major themes and motifs within *The Tempest* and provided examples of scenes where you can study them.

## Themes

- Power and control
- Betrayal, revenge and forgiveness

## Motifs

(Recurring elements and patterns of imagery in *The Tempest* which support the play's themes)

- Magic
- Sounds and music
- Water and the sea
- Earth and air
- Costume and theatre
- Servant and master

## Themes

**Power and control** and the nature of just and productive leadership.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 2: Prospero tells Miranda of his betrayal by Alonso and Antonio and explains that he has instructed Ariel to shipwreck the King's party; Ariel challenges Prospero; Prospero lambastes Caliban and punishes him for his defiance.
- Act 2 Scene 1: Antonio and Sebastian discuss the idea of conscience and attempt to murder Alonso and Gonzalo.
- Act 2 Scene 2: Caliban acquires a new master, Stephano, who calls him 'Monster.'
- Act 5 Scene 1: Ariel reports that he has charmed the noblemen into immobility as Prospero instructed him to do. Prospero plans to break his magic staff and drown his books after this last piece of his revenge plan is complete.

**Betrayal, revenge and forgiveness**, the consequences of each and the journey from turbulence to harmony.

Some related scenes:

- Act 1 Scene 2: Prospero tells Miranda of his betrayal by Alonso and Antonio and explains that he has instructed Ariel to shipwreck the King's party.
- Act 3 Scene 2: Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo plot to murder Prospero.
- Act 3 Scene 3: In response to Ariel's magic banquet Alonso feels remorse for his past behaviour while Sebastian and Antonio continue their plotting.
- Act 4 Scene 1: Prospero thwarts Caliban's plot to murder him and tells Ariel to inflict them with cramps, convulsions and pinches.
- Act 5 Scene 1: Prospero releases the noblemen from their charm, welcomes Gonzalo, forgives Alonso, and privately warns Antonio and Sebastian. With provisos he will forgive Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo.

## Motifs

**Magic** as a manifestation of power and control.

For example:

- 'And pluck my magic garment from me'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'I flamed amazement; sometime I'd divide, / And burn in many places'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'My master through his art foresees the danger / That you, his friend, are in, and sends me forth'  
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Thunder and lightning. Enter Ariel, like a harpy, claps his wings upon the table, and, with a quaint device, the banquet vanishes'  
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'My charms crack not, my spirits obey, and time / Goes upright with his carriage'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'I have bedimmed / The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds, / And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault / Set roaring war'  
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'But this rough magic / I here abjure'  
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'They all enter the circle which Prospero had made, and there stand charmed'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Sounds and magic** as helping to create the spirit of the magic island and giving atmosphere to key moments of action.

For example:

- 'A tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard'  
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'Where should this music be? i'the air or the earth?'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Hark! Now I hear them - Ding-dong bell'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Enter Ariel, invisible, playing solemn music'  
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'the isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs'  
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Solemn and strange music'  
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'Marvellous sweet music!'  
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'they prick'd their ears, / Advanced their eyelids, lifted up their noses / As they smelt music...'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'A noise of hunters heard'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'and, when I have required / Some heavenly music, which even now I do...'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Water and the sea** as powerful and unpredictable, as constant reminders of the tempests which have shipwrecked two boats and created such turbulence in the lives of the main characters; also as reinforcing the exotic isolation of the island and the sense of journey as metaphor.

For example:

- 'Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground'  
Act 1 Scene 1
- 'But that the sea, mounting to the welkin's cheek / Dashes the fire out'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Sit still, and hear the last of our sea-sorrow'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Re-enter Ariel like a water-nymph'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'This music crept by me upon the waters, / Allaying both their fury and my passion'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Nothing of him that doth fade / but Doth suffer a sea-change / Into something rich and strange'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Exposed unto the sea, which hath requit it, / Him and his innocent child: for which foul deed / The powers, delaying, not forgetting have / Incensed the seas and shores'  
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'I'll deliver all; / And promise you calm seas, auspicious gales'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Earth and air** as underscoring the elemental, ageless nature of the island and as representing the contrasting qualities of key characters.

For example:

- 'To run upon the sharp wind of the north, / To do me business in the veins o'the earth / When it is baked with frost'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'What, ho! slave! Caliban! / Thou earth, thou! speak'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'This is no mortal business, nor no sound / That the earth owes. I hear it now above me'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air...'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Some heavenly music... / To work mine end upon their senses that / This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff, / Bury it certain fathoms in the earth'  
Act 5 Scene 1
- 'Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling / Of their afflictions, and shall not myself, / One of their kind...'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Costume and theatre** as magical, illusory; also as transformational and symbolic of a change in character.

For example:

- 'And pluck my magic garment from me'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Enter Ariel like a water-nymph'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Solemn and strange music; and Prospero on the top, invisible. Enter several strange shapes...'  
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'Enter Ariel, like a harpy'  
Act 3 Scene 3
- 'Spirits, which by mine art / I have from their confines called to enact / My present fancies'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'And, like the baseless fabric of this vision, / The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself...'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Enter Ariel, loaden with glistening apparel'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'O King Stephano! O peer! O worthy Stephano, look what a wardrobe here is for thee!  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Put off that gown, Trinculo. By this hand, I'll have that gown!  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'Fetch me the hat and rapier in my cell / I will discase me, and myself present / As I was sometime Milan'  
Act 5 Scene 1

**Servant and master** as varied examples of the exercise of power.

For example:

- 'Come away, servant, come. I am ready now. / Approach, my Ariel, come  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains, / Let me remember thee what thou hast promised, / Which is not yet performed me'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Thou, my slave, / As thou report'st thyself, was then her servant'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'When thou cam'st first, / Thou strok'st me, and made much of me...And then I loved thee'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'For I am all the subjects that you have, / Which first was mine own king'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'Thou most lying slave / Whom stripes may move, not kindness...'  
Act 1 Scene 2
- 'my brother's servants / Were then my fellows; now they are my men'  
Act 2 Scene 1
- 'Drink, servant-monster, when I bid thee'  
Act 3 Scene 2
- 'Monster, I will kill this man: his daughter and I will be king and queen - save our graces! - and Trinculo and thyself shall be viceroys'  
Act 3 Scene 2

- 'Do you love me, master? no?'  
Act 4 Scene 1
- 'My Ariel, chick, / That is thy charge. Then to the elements / Be free, and fare  
thou well'  
Act 5 Scene 1