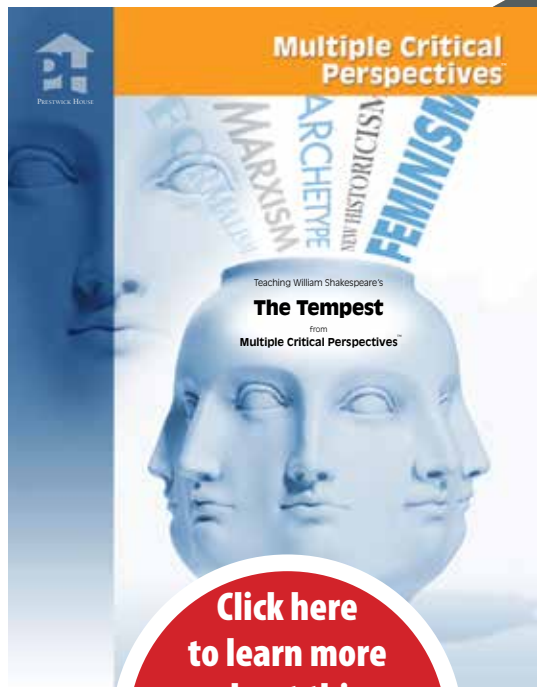




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# Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching William Shakespeare's

## **The Tempest**

from

**Multiple Critical Perspectives™**

by

Elizabeth Osborne



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## General Introduction to the Play

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### Introduction to *The Tempest*

A DIFFICULT PLAY TO CATEGORIZE BY GENRE, *The Tempest* is generally dated around 1610-11 and accepted as the last play written by Shakespeare alone. Although it is listed as a comedy in its initial publication of 1623, many modern editors consider the play to be a romance.

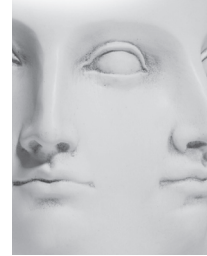
*The Tempest* is, in fact, a hybrid of both comedy, tragedy, and romance. It is a tale of revenge, but it is also the story of naïve love and absolute forgiveness and reconciliation. Regal characters of terrible potential are juxtaposed against bumbling clowns and naïve young adults, and it all occurs in an enchanted setting that seems to exist somewhere outside of reality.

The setting of *The Tempest* reflects the Zeitgeist of Elizabethan culture, which was rife with imagination about undiscovered lands and strange peoples beyond the oceans. Specifically, the wreck of the *Sea Venture* is thought to have inspired *The Tempest*. The *Sea Venture* was a Virginia Company supply ship lost in a storm while en route to the Jamestown colony. The ship, carrying the newly appointed governor of Jamestown, ran aground in Bermuda. The crew spent months surviving and repairing the ship, and the account of the lost governor returning to his appointed post in Jamestown quickly captured the imagination of England.

### The Genre of the Play

While certainly the plot contains obvious elements of the traditional comedy—the clown, the occurrence of outlandish coincidences, the theme of general reconciliation—the story also draws heavily from the tradition of the Romance. Born in the medieval tales of chivalry and knights, Romance featured a purely fictitious narrative set far away from ordinary life in both atmosphere and physical setting. Romances typically contained elements of the supernatural and themes of wandering, exploration, and discovery. Romances were often set along a coast or on islands—to emphasize the themes of wandering and exploration. They usually involved exotic locations and often developed themes of wrongdoing and forgiveness, loss and retrieval, exile and return. Thus, although *The Tempest* was originally listed as a comedy, it is probably more accurately classified as a “Shakespearean romance.” This classification remains unsatisfactory to many, however, who point to the strong presence of comic and tragic elements as well as elements of the romance.

## Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *The Tempest*



### Notes on the Psychoanalytic Approach

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

#### Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



## Activity One

### Offering A Psychological Analysis of Prospero

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *The Tempest*: Psychoanalytic Activity One: Analysis of Prospero's Character.
2. Divide the class into pairs or small groups of three or four.
3. Have groups review the play, especially Act I, Scene II when we learn Prospero's backstory.
4. While students review the play, have them answer the questions on the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and discuss.

*NOTE: While some of the answers to the questions on the handout are matters of textual fact (e.g. we know that Prospero has at least the one brother, Antonio), others are matters of inference from textual clues and social/historical background (e.g. Prospero was probably the eldest son, and he probably inherited the dukedom from his father who had been Duke before him). Allow students to voice their various interpretations, but do insist on textual support.*



## Mythological/Archetypal Theory Applied to *The Tempest*



### Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure... that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!



### 3. Archetypal Situations

- the QUEST: the hero's endeavor to establish his or her identity or fulfill his or her destiny.

Variations on the QUEST can include:

- the Faustian bargain: the selling of one's soul to the devil (metaphorically representing the notion that one would "give anything" in order to...) in exchange for unlimited power, knowledge, wealth, etc. Examples include King Midas.
- the pursuit of revenge for a real or perceived wrong, as exemplified by Captain Ahab's quest in *Moby Dick*.
- the descent into the underworld. (Note that this is usually one part of the quest rather than the entire quest itself.)
- the RENEWAL OF LIFE: death and rebirth, resurrection as seen in the cycle of the seasons, the phases of the day, sleeping and waking. Examples are "Sleeping Beauty," "The Secret Garden," etc.
- INITIATION: coming of age, rites of passage. Some examples include the first hunt, weddings, teenage angst films.
- THE FALL: any event that marks a loss of innocence, a devolution from a paradisaical life or view-point to a tainted one.
- REDEMPTIVE SACRIFICE: any voluntary loss, especially a loss of life, that results in another's gaining or regaining a desired state.
- the CATALOG OF DIFFICULT TASKS: (labors of Hercules, Cinderella's treatment by her step-mother and stepsisters, etc.).
- the END OF THE WORLD: usually apocalyptic, involving warfare, a huge battle, a metaphoric final battle between good and evil.

Variations on the end of the world include:

- Armageddon: the final battle between good and evil according to the Christian New Testament (book of Revelation), in which evil is finally vanquished, evildoers receive their eternal punishment, and God reigns over a newly-created Heaven and Earth;

## Feminist Theory Applied to *The Tempest*



### Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.





## Activity One

### Questions for A Feminist Reading

1. Copy and distribute the handout: The Tempest: *Feminist Activity One—Questions*.
2. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—review the play and answer the questions.
3. Reconvene the class, and discuss whether or not it is possible to interpret Ariel as a feminine character.
4. How does interpreting Ariel as feminine alter the students' appreciation or understanding of the play?