

Shakespeare's The Tempest as a Microcosm of Society

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The Tempest as Microcosm of Society

The Tempest is one of Shakespeare's most universal plays and, not coincidentally, is very much concerned with human behavior and emotion. As John Wilders observes in *The Lost Garden*, "Prospero's island is what the sociologists call a 'model' of human society. Its cast of characters allows Shakespeare to portray in microcosm nearly all the basic, fundamental social relationships: those of a ruler to his territory, a governor to his subjects, a father to his child, masters to servants, male to female, and the rational to the irrational within the human microcosm itself" ([London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1978], 127).

[Prospero](#) himself is an observer of and experimenter with human behavior: he saw human nature at its worst when his brother usurped his dukedom and sent Prospero and Miranda off to almost certain death; he has tried to nurture Caliban's human half and to teach the monster acceptable human conduct; he demonstrates a working knowledge of reverse psychology when he maneuvers his daughter into love with Ferdinand; and, finally, he examines his own behavior and emotions in relation to his enemies, [relatives](#), and friends.

Prospero and the play ask two questions: Is behavior such as Antonio's the basic nature of

human beings; and, if so, can nurture improve upon nature? In modern terms, the play struggles with the ever-present debate over the impact of [heredity](#) and environment.

His first observations--of Antonio's and Alonso's treachery--were inadvertent and even unexpected; however, they prompted Prospero to shift the focus of his studies from "the liberal arts" to human behavior. Prospero has devoted himself to gaining knowledge and, as he admits to Miranda, neglected h...

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...“the Ariel and the Caliban of which his own—and our—nature consists” (Wilders, *New Prefaces to Shakespeare*, 273); he has found the answer to the dilemma of nature vs. nurture in his own psyche, and with this knowledge he returns to the human society of Milan a more balanced, more complete human being than when he left it.

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