The Tempest

Comedy or Tragedy

Can a play be a comedy, romance and tragedy all in one? One of Shakespeare's works, known as the Tempest, is a tricky play to classify. It has many elements of a comedy, while retaining the qualities of a tragedy and romance.

The Tempest has three different stories going on at once. The first one has to do with Stephano and Trinculo. These two are heavy drinkers, meaning that they are often drunk. They give the story a more light hearted feel. They make many jokes such as the time Stephano asks if Caliban can vent, meaning can he poop. “Trinculo, can he vent.” Any story that cracks a poop joke is bound to be at least a partial comedy. Eventually Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban set off to try and kill Prospero. They fail in this task because they are easily distracted by some nice looking clothes, except for Caliban.

Ariel also does his part in making the story light hearted. Ariel is a spirit who is an asset of Prospero. He is oftentimes seen messing with Caliban. When Trinculo finds Caliban, Caliban thinks that he is being tormented by Ariel. Later on, Ariel messes with
the other shipwrecked sailors by putting out a feast and then taking it away. At the beginning of the story, you learn that the Tempest was actually caused by Ariel. Ariel is eventually released by Prospero at the end of the play.

Many sources, such as CliffsNotes and Schmoop have stated that Tempest is a comedy largely due to the fact that it ends in a wedding. Very few wedding stories are actually tragedies. This leads even more to the idea that this play is a comedy, or even a romance. The two lovers in this story, Miranda and Ferdinand, often throughout the story make jokes about being in love. Romances are sometimes paired with a tragedy, such as Romeo and Juliet, or they attributed with comedies. Those are just a few reasons why I think Tempest is a comedy.

As I stated previously, this story acts in some ways like a romance. Ferdinand, a handsome young sailor, falls in love with the beautiful lady Miranda. Prospero, wanting to test Ferdinand’s love, makes him do work as a trial to marry Miranda. Even though Miranda insists on getting Ferdinand to take a break, even to the point of asking to do the work for him, Ferdinand refuses to stop his vigorous work. Prospero, seeing this, finally allows Ferdinand to marry Miranda.

Miranda, after going through many trials, finally gets to marry Ferdinand. There is a big play put on for them, telling them about the wonders of love. These two sadly have their play interrupted by the plot of Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban. This as explained earlier was failed by Prospero having fancy clothes put out as a distraction. At the end
of the story, when the wrong doers are forgiven. Ferdinand and Miranda are seen playing a casual game of chess. After this they are officially united in marriage

With all of these things pointing towards a happy romance comedy play, How could there be any more room for a darker tragedy theme? First of all, let’s look at Caliban. Caliban, a half human half monster was born on the island. His mother, the witch Sycorax, was exiled to the island. She died when Caliban was young, leaving him to fend for himself. A few years later comes Prospero to the island. He “rescues” Ariel from a tree and makes him his slave. Prospero takes over the island, enslaving all of the inhabitants, including Caliban. Caliban, filled with rancor, wants to pay retribution to Prospero by killing him.

Caliban recruits the ship wrecked sailors, Trinculo and Stephano, to do the deed. While trying to kill Prospero, they are tormented by Ariel. Once they reach Prospero’s house, they are distracted by fancy clothes and are then chased off by the sound of dogs. If Stephano and Trinculo would have succeeded in this. They would have also forced Miranda to live with them.

Prospero is not the only one who was almost killed, but Gonzalo as well. Sebastian and Antonio try to kill the poor old Gonzalo, and then take his kingdom. The poor man never did anything wrong. He was trying to be optimistic in a time of dread, and Antonio and Sebastian mocked him. He had done nothing wrong, in fact, he helped Prospero escape. Earlier, Prospero was exiled by the same people who tried to kill
Gonzalo. These two are greedy men, willing to do whatever it takes to get what they want.

Tempest is overall a comedic story that has a serious plotline. It keeps the story entertaining while keeping the story interesting. The magic and jokes keep it from being a full on tragedy, plus it ends in a wedding. This play keeps a good balance between the themes. I cannot say that the Tempest has only one theme.
Work Cited

“About the Tempest” CliffsNotes


My E-mail is jakemischnick@gmail.com