

The Tempest Study Notes



Directed by: Julie Taymor

Certificate: PG

Running time: 110 mins

Release date: 4 March 2011

Synopsis:

This modern retelling of William Shakespeare's final masterpiece is an exciting, mystical and magical fantasy with Academy® Award-winner Helen Mirren leading a star-studded cast including Russell Brand and Alfred Molina. Exiled to a magical island, the sorceress Prospera conjures up a storm that shipwrecks her enemies, and then unleashes her powers for revenge.

These Study Notes are designed to support English and Drama at Key Stage 3, GCSE and equivalent. They will also suit teaching of the film in the context of Media and Film Studies.

Before viewing

Anticipation – ‘Your tale, sir, would cure deafness.’

Use your knowledge of *The Tempest*’s plot to consider how you could ‘sell’ it to those that might finance a film version.

- If you have yet to study the play, find an online synopsis.
- What would you emphasise as the play’s unique selling points? Who would be the audience for a screen adaptation of the film, do you think?

Follow this up with a study of the film’s trailer, which you can view on the official site <http://tempest-themovie.com/>

- What aspects of the play does the trailer emphasise and what do you make of the key ‘themes’, ‘passion’, ‘stupidity’, ‘revenge’ etc. that it chooses to highlight?
- Can you think of any themes that are ignored?

Julie Taymor, the director of *The Tempest*, is an award-winning stage director and her previous films have attracted lots of critical approval, especially her 1999 *Titus Andronicus*, a film adaptation of one of Shakespeare’s earliest plays. Conduct some online research about her work as director. What might you expect from this film version, based on what you have been able to find out?

There are other film versions of *The Tempest* for example, Derek Jarman’s 1979 punk/camp version and Peter Greenaway’s eccentric 1991 *Prospero’s Books* in which every part in the play is spoken by John Gielgud. Try to watch key scenes across different film versions before you see *The Tempest*.

After viewing

‘Wipe thou thine eyes: have comfort...’

Gender and Characterisation

The biggest alteration Taymor makes to the play is in turning its protagonist Prospero into a Prospera – a female ‘magician’.

- What difference, if any, does this change make? Consider her relationship with her daughter Miranda and her deceitful brother Antonio.
- Is there any other evidence of how Helen Mirren's casting requires the story to be made 'female' in any way?
- How does Taymor establish Prospera as the potent centre of events within the first moments of the film?
- How does she show the shift in the character from powerful wielder of magic to tender parent and back again as occurs at the play's beginning?

Plot and Structure

The play begins with a long piece of 'exposition' (back-story) in which Prospero fills Miranda (and the audience) in on the details of his life and why he is stranded on the island. This is challenging on stage where the words must create the pictures.

- How does Taymor use the possibilities of film to bring this potentially quite static sequence to life? How effective did you find this sequence?

The play contains no fewer than four separate strands: Prospero's domestic dramas with Miranda and Ferdinand; Prospero's relationships with Ariel and Caliban; the low-life characters' meeting and mistreatment of Caliban; and the progress of the shipwrecked nobles.

- How successfully does the director manage the transitions from one plot thread to another?
- To what extent are these scenes kept distinct both in terms of mood or setting?
- In the play it is almost as if each character experiences a different island. Is that something this film version suggests?

Cinema Magic?

'If in Naples/ I should report this now, would they believe me?'

What techniques are used in *The Tempest* to create the following moments of magic:

- A storm made terrible by a flying spirit
- Conjuring 'tricks' that can rob a person of movement or send out cramps to torment someone
- Vanishing illusionary banquets

- Ariel as a harpy
- Characters pursued by magical hounds
- How effective do you find these elements of the film?
- In what ways does this film version achieve effects that would not be possible on stage?

Responding to the Film

Consolidate your research and your thoughts on the film into a review. Here are some things to consider:

- Taymor's direction and interpretation – did she manage to make the story fresh for a modern audience and did she tell the story clearly?
- Were the characters well played? Critics were full of praise for Helen Mirren and her interactions with Felicity Jones (Miranda) but what about the rest of the cast? Some writers commented that some of the actors gave very different kinds of performance: some very exaggerated and others quite 'naturalistic' – do you agree?
- Several critics described the low-life characters played by Alfred Molina and Russell Brand as being 'unfunny'. Do you agree and is this actually a criticism? Are their scenes all that funny given what they do to Caliban?
- What did you think of the way the actor (Djimon Hounsou) playing Caliban presented the character? Would you have suggested he altered his performance in any way if you were in charge? Explain how.
- Costumes and staging are often very important in Taymor's films. Was there much evidence of her strong 'art-design' or theatrical background?
- How does the film end – on a positive note or with lots of loose ends? If the latter, what are they?

Written by Jerome Monahan