
A Look at the Macabre and Analogous Role Played by Prospero in the Tempest

What is reality? And how do we know for sure that the reality in which we live is not a false one? For some people the answer is clear, but for others the answer is a muddy one. A portion of a person's individual psyche is more powerful than actual reality itself, and this can be triggered through experiences that are uncanny and revive repressed material. Though what is considered uncanny in real life is not always uncanny in literature, uncanny literature can prove very insightful about aspects of ourselves. Throughout *The Tempest*, magic is used to create an uncanny ambiguity between reality and illusion to portray Prospero's coming self-realization of his repressed resentment towards the noble characters.

To begin, the setting of the island itself is an excellent representation of the blurred line between reality and illusion and is a magical "stage" under the orchestration of Prospero. The "author initially creates a kind of uncertainty" in how he can either "take us into the real world or into some fantastic world of his own choosing" (139). The noble characters in *The Tempest* are residents of Europe but had recently attended a wedding in Africa, and on the way back they are brought to an island by a mysterious storm. This island is that intermediate space between the world they are familiar with and the foreign land which they had previously visited – an ambiguous in-between of two distinctly different places. This island functions as an uncanny and fantastic setting for the characters, and magic is the sole reason why the nobles end up on the island. Prospero asks Ariel if s/he had "performed to point the tempest that I bade thee," and Ariel affirms that the fantastic storm created by magic did indeed land the nobles on the island (1.2.194-206). This magic can't exist elsewhere, and because the nobles left the security of their homeland, they were susceptible to Prospero's magic power, leading them to this island "stage" where they are under the influence of Prospero. The fact that Prospero's magic is the cause of the nobles arriving at the island contributes to the uncanniness of the island, making it even more an ambiguous in-between of reality and illusion as well as a place where the repressed material of society can exist outside of the "real" world because it would otherwise distort civilization.

The character of Prospero himself is that of a somewhat ambiguous figure, a blur of what is real and what is unreal. Through the use of "his books, for without them he is but a sot," Prospero exercises an attained magic power and uses it to manipulate both the nobles and the unusual occurrences on the island (3.2.87-88). However, Prospero is not an original native of the island but was rather previously "the Duke of Milan and prince of power" as he tells Miranda (1.2.53-54). These two qualities give him an essence of the "real world" as well as the

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“illusionary world” of the island that he presently resides on and controls, and this creates the ambiguity of what is real and what is illusion simply because Prospero possesses these magic powers despite the fact that he is from the “real world.” In this way, the “host has become ‘uncanny,’” and Prospero, being the “host” of the island and in control of what occurs, has indeed become this uncanny figure (146). As previously stated, the island is a “stage” where Prospero orchestrates his magic powers, thus making him the uncanny “host” of the production.

However, one may only “call a living person uncanny” with the stipulation that he has evil intent “with the help of special powers” (149). Prospero indeed has the help of special magic powers throughout the play, but it is debatable whether or not Prospero has evil intent. Caliban wishes that “all the infections that the sun sucks up from bogs, fens, and flats” befall Prospero, which indicates that Prospero could be perceived as “evil” to Caliban, and Prospero is rather unkind to Caliban throughout the play as well (2.2.1-2). Prospero also has much influence over the nobles with the help of Ariel’s music to put them to sleep in numerous scenes in order to orchestrate their behaviors. This use of control could be seen as evil intent when taken by itself, but it is through this use of magic and blurred reality that Prospero eventually obtains a better sense of his repressed resentment towards the nobles. Because of this, near the end of the play he says “I’ll break my staff” and “I’ll drown my book,” thus renouncing his magic powers so that he may become wholly “real” (5.1.54-57). Also, in the first scene of act five, Prospero forgives Antonio, gives Alonso his son back, and brings the nobles out of their mystical daze which shows that Prospero ends up not having the “evil intent” required by definition to be uncanny. Perhaps this is because it is through his use of magic as well as the ambiguity between reality and illusion on the island that finally cause him to observe his repressed resentment, which could imply that his character could indeed be an uncanny one only until he recognizes this repressed resentment and renounces the aspects of his character that make him uncanny.

The third scene in the third act of *The Tempest* also elicits very strong characteristics of the uncanny that are indicative of Prospero’s repressed resentment. In this scene, there are “strange shapes, bringing in a banquet” that “dance about it with gentle actions of salutations” (3.3.19-20). The nobles that witness this occurrence are rather stunned by it as these strange shapes are not necessarily representative of human physiology, but rather something more mysterious and unexpected. The uncanniness lies in the idea that nobody particularly knows where these shapes came from, and they are in awe (perhaps even fear) of their existence. Here, the uncanny is presented by the idea that “human spirits” exist along with “carefully graded magical powers” that are “against the unmistakable sanctions of reality” (147). The strange shapes are not human, but “their manners are more gentle” when compared to the rest of the human race, thus making them uncanny figures (3.3.32). In this, the ambiguity between reality and illusion has been established because these shapes do not look human, yet they

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behave like the most courteous aristocrats. They are also the result of certain “magical powers” that are required by definition to make them uncanny. Ariel appears shortly after in the form of a harpy and explicitly tells the nobles “I have made you mad” along with informing them that it was their previous deeds that brought them to their fates on the island (3.3.52-80). This madness is caused by the magical practices being performed on the island by Prospero that blur the line between reality and illusion. The noble characters are very unsettled by these shapes, and it becomes clear that Prospero intended to scare the nobles with his magic powers, which is indicative of Prospero’s repressed resentment toward them since he intended to seek some sort of justice or perhaps even revenge on the nobles in this way.

The uncanny can be created in literature through the use of magic and an ambiguity between reality and illusion, and this is precisely what has been done in Shakespeare’s romance, *The Tempest*. Because of the uncanny things that are present in this play, Prospero is able to get a better sense of his own self as his repressed resentment toward the nobles is brought to the surface for observation. The island itself is Prospero’s “stage” of intermediate space that blurs reality and illusion, and Prospero acts as an in-between of reality and illusion as well due to his magic powers which he uses to orchestrate the events that occur on the island as well as manipulate the nobles to enact a sort of justice on them. Through these aspects of *The Tempest*, the magic used to create the ambiguity between reality and illusion allows Prospero to become more self-aware of his repressed resentment toward the nobles and eventually renounce that resentment in order to rejoin civilized society.

Works Cited

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