Time is fleeting. Death is certain. For man, that is—nature plays by its own rules. Perhaps it is raw jealousy that causes man to seemingly ever be at odds with nature, but regardless, popular depiction suggests that man must either overcome it or succumb. This natural law is played out conspicuously in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*; the title might as well be a giant neon sign advertising the fact. However, the storm serves both a literal and metaphoric significance. The eternal struggle between man and nature reflects the desire within Prospero for meaningful existence in regards to his own standing in the natural world.

A popular idiom today that mothers, wedding planners, and filing enthusiasts use is “a place for everything and everything in its place.” Back during the Renaissance, they would just call that the Great Chain of Being, which attempted to rationalize an irrational universe. Thomas Elyot in his 1531 treatise, *The Book of the Governor*, wrote “Every kind of trees, herbs, birds, beasts, and fishes have a peculiar disposition appropered unto them by God their creator; so that in everything is order, and without order may be nothing stable or permanent” (Tillyard 172). Everything was given a position; God was naturally the highest Platonic form in Christianized Europe, but that left mankind in a state of flux: where do human fall in this natural order? Somewhere above paramecium and below angels is not specific enough to inquiring minds, and so philosophers and scientists for centuries have sought to discover the answer. The Renaissance academic Copernicus created the heliocentric model, theorizing Earth to revolve around the sun
and not the other way around. Copernicus sought “the reverse…to the new astronomy; to remove man from the centre of things was to raise him from his low estate” (Lovejoy 104). Copernicus’ theory challenged theological argumentation based on literal interpretations of the Bible and upset human impression on the natural balance. It forced people to redefine their understanding of their placement under both a physical and spiritual sense.

One such event to question the placement of man against nature occurred in 1609 when the English ship Sea Venture was shipwrecked off the Bermuda islands. Two of the survivors, William Strachey and Sylvester Jourdain, wrote about their adventure, though in contrasting perspectives. Strachey’s account depicted the event on Homeric proportions, stating that the storm that sunk the ship was “like an hell of darkness turned black upon us, so much the more fuller of horror…troubled and overmastered senses of all” (122). He continues to exclaim the terror of the ocean waters and the paralyzing clamor that befall the passengers. As for the islands, he refers to them as “Devil’s Islands” and being as horrifying as the storm itself (123). Jourdain, on the other hand, describes the event more generously. He says, “it pleased God to work so strongly as the water was stayed for that little time…and the ship kept from present sinking” (125). And while talking about the islands, he mentions “the country [is] so abundantly fruitful of all fit necessaries for the sustentation and preservation of man’s life” (125).

Both accounts call into question the struggle between man and nature. According to Strachey, humankind trembles before nature and survives out of divine intervention. Jourdain, while he definitely alludes to the presence of a higher being, depicts mankind as being a bit more resourceful and unyielding to nature’s chaotic whims. In The Tempest, Shakespeare explores the same struggle. The storm may have caused the shipwreck, but Prospero caused the storm. Yet, Prospero has relied on the resources he scavenges from the island to survive these past twelve
years. The struggle between which of the two, nature or man, wields the most power is an important theme in *The Tempest*.

For Prospero, time represents the natural element that he tries to overpower. Prospero is well aware of the name he left for himself back in his former Dukedom of Milan. He abandoned his duties and allowed himself to be run out, leaving behind a legacy of negligence and cowardice. The tempest and its resounding effects grant him a chance to redeem his image. He explains to Ferdinand and Miranda that “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (4.1.156-158). Prospero acknowledges the transience of nature. Being deposed and exiled to the island has forced him to confront the fact that any power he wields—political, magical, or social—is but for a brief time. The struggle he contends with is how to conquer time in the same manner as he is able to control the tempest, and in doing so leaving a lasting impact on the world. One of the ways he intends to do so is through his family line. His daughter’s prospective marriage to Ferdinand seals this destiny, even receiving a blessing from Ceres laden with double entendres as “Spring come to you at the farthest / In the very end of harvest! / Scarcity and want shall shun you” (4.1.114-116).

Essentially, in the spiritual world order there are only two options: the redeemed and the damned. Prospero battles over his own position in this divine order, struggling to improve his moral worth to ascend from the depths of hell. Part of the greater struggles for humanity is the blurred lines between rationality and animal instinct, the id and the ego, the heart and the brain. Like any person, Prospero contends with his natural impulses and the logical reasoning in his head, and sorting out when one is crossing over to the other. According to the animalistic laws of survival—eat or be eaten, kill or be killed—Prospero has every right to kill the shipwrecked members of the island. The power-conscientious and impulsive choice would be easy; anybody
back home in the Italian city-states would believe them to have drowned during the tempest, and his legitimate claim to rule bears him great favor too. But Prospero overcomes the temptation, and follows instead a stronger conviction of mercy, an ability lost in the animal kingdom.

The Great Chain of Being depicts a rigid order to the universe, but that strictness means that it is difficult for people to know where they stand in the world. In The Tempest, Prospero reflects an understanding of the Great Chain of Being that indicates the only way to prove human superiority against the natural world is to demonstrate rationality and moral righteousness in the face of chaos and temptation.
Works Cited


