



THE THRESHOLD, THE TWILIGHT AND THE ENIGMATIC GATEWAY: LIMINALITY IN *THE TEMPEST* AND *THE NIGHT CIRCUS*

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Abstract

Liminal spaces are transitional spaces bending the rules of reality making the impossible possible. This article attempts to analyze liminality of physical spaces and its impact on characters. In *The Tempest*, the island, isolated and separated from the rest of the world as it is, becomes a liminal space transforming the lives of almost everyone who spent time on it. In *The Night Circus*, the circus with its aura of mystery, a black and white chalked ground for the game of life and death between Celia and Marco becomes a liminal space for everyone ever associated with it. Both island and circus play a far more pivotal role than just that of a setting. They become the gateway to realizations, vengeance, retribution, love and achievements. Through the article, the impact of the two places on various characters and their experiences and their subsequent reaction to the liminality they experience and undergo and the final destination they arrive at, literally and figuratively.

Keywords

Spaces, Liminality, Suspended, Transitory, Ambiguity, etc.

Full Article

Liminal spaces are the waiting rooms that one has to sit in and wait, to attain what one came for. Maybe it's a dentist's appointment, maybe it's an interview to secure a new job, and maybe even waiting out one's turn to get a nose piercing. All of these are in-between states, thresholds which, once you cross, you change. Blurring of conventional 'reality' occurs. This change can be physical or psychological, big or small, but it is a change nevertheless and a permanent one at that. Stairs, hallways, abandoned areas, waiting rooms, airports, and even train and bus stations are popular images of physical liminal spaces. Adolescence, the ending of a relationship and grief are all psychological liminal spaces. Something common to all these places is the sense of temporariness and transition that they arouse in people. They are betwixt, making one feel disoriented and disconnected, overwhelmed and even lost at times. "During liminal periods of all kinds, social hierarchies may be reversed or temporarily dissolved, continuity of tradition may become uncertain, and future outcomes once taken for granted may be thrown into doubt."

The theory of liminal space begins with the study of ritual. In *The Rites of Passage* (1960), Arnold van Gennep lays the foundation for the study of threshold ritual. Van Gennep, concerned with "ceremonial patterns which accompany a passage from one situation to another or from one cosmic or social world to another," divides such rites into three subcategories: "preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites



(rites of incorporation)” (van Gennep, 11). All of these rites may apply either to an individual or a social group—including an entire culture (van Gennep, 1). *The Tempest*, one of the last plays written by William Shakespeare, is a tale of revenge of an exiled Duke, Prospero, who lives alone on an island with his daughter and his two servants - Ariel and Caliban. Dethroned and exiled through false means by his own brother Antonio and his enemy, the King of Naples, Prospero is a man on a mission – vengeance. The play, however, begins in the present where Prospero has ordered Ariel, his fairy slave to create consternation among the crew of a ship that he has wrecked with the storm he created. His past is narrated in a flashback when Miranda questions his actions. The prince of Naples is made to believe that his father is dead and is led to the island by Ariel while the rest of the crew consisting of King Alonso, Antonio the false Duke of Milan, Sebastian, the younger brother of the King, Gonzalo and two aides of the King of Naples, are told that the prince is no more. They too are left stranded on the island, and it doesn't take long for Ariel and Prospero's magic to make them go almost crazy, what with the onslaught of hallucinations and illusions that they are met with. The drama ends on a positive note with the fixing of the marriage of Ferdinand, prince of Naples to Miranda, Prospero's daughter.

In Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*, the character of Prospero, the Enchanter is on a seemingly endless mission to prove his magical prowess to his former teacher and now opponent, Mr. H. The two have been playing this game for a long while now. Both magicians choose a protege who will represent them and their way of magic in a long, drawn-out duel which defies time and space until there is a victor. What this means is that one of the competitors has to die for them to be freed from the bonds of the challenge. And since the bonds essentially bind the souls of the two competitors together and to the challenge, as a previous contestant recounts, the competitors end up falling in love or at the very least harbor some form of affection towards their opponent, which in turn complicates the game. What seems like a cruel joke by the fates has left a string of broken-hearted victors. This is where Celia Bowen and Marco Alisdair one up their predecessors and get the better of the spell that binds them.

Celia, the daughter of Prospero the Enchanter's and Marco, Mr. H's orphan student are bound to the game before they can even understand the weight of what they have been forced into. When they're deemed ready for the face off, a stage is set up for their battle. This stage is the circus. But it's not any ordinary circus. Instead, Le Cirque de Reves is teeming with magic. Tarot reader, contortionists, illusionist, why, even children seem to be possessing as far as magic is concerned. Celia and Marco's battle commences but they inevitably fall in love. However, the binding spell is too strong for them to resist. The more they resist the more it endangers the circus and anyone affiliated with the circus which includes the performers, founders, even Reveurs, the followers of the circus.

As Grydehøj notes “islands often create an illusion of self-containment, stripping characters of societal roles and compelling them to redefine their core selves. This isolation intensifies their psychological and existential journeys, reflecting broader questions of identity, morality, and societal constructs” (Grydehøj, 15). In the play, the island occupied by the father and daughter was previously home to Caliban and his dead mother Sycorax. Upon the exiled Duke's arrival, he turns it to his territory and makes both Ariel and Caliban work for him. He uses the magic he learned and makes use of Ariel's as well. The first to arrive on the island is the young prince of Naples, Ferdinand who is grieving the death of his father. He mistakes Miranda to be a goddess who similarly thinks him to be a spirit. They fall in love with each other at first sight, something common to many of Shakespeare's works. However, Prospero intent on testing the young prince, makes him undergo severe physical labor. Ferdinand who



has been used to royal treatment like attending courts, balls and princely governance has in a day been transformed into a slave forced to do labor for the sake of love. Although clearly not used to it he shows true charisma when he refuses Miranda's help. In the end his determination and genuine love for Miranda wins and Prospero comes to the happy conclusion that the two will most definitely make a good couple and blesses them. In this way, the island is a physically transformative place for the prince. He arrived with sadness only to fall in love and toil for it. In the end, even his cause for misery is nullified when the secret of his father's supposed death is revealed. In Miranda's case although she is in love with Ferdinand, she cannot tell him that she reciprocates his love as that would mean going against her father's wishes which she does not wish to do. However, she does end up disobeying her father's command. She tries to help Ferdinand without her father's knowledge, offering to carry the heavy logs he was ordered to carry. It is safe to assume that Miranda as the daughter of a brilliant magician like Prospero would not have had to do such tasks at any point of her life thus showing. When her offer to help was declined she resorts to keeping him company by talking. Both seem to be equally enamored by the other, but whereas in Ferdinand's case he's open and clear about it, Miranda due to her father's direct orders is not able to acknowledge it. She's stuck trying to show her love for Ferdinand subtly while also trying not to disobey the orders of her father.

Miranda also stands somewhere between ignorance and innocence, and growing knowledge and awareness, through the happenings on the island as well as Prospero's revelation of the past. Growing up, her world was limited to the confines of the island, but in a single day she's forced to see the complexities in the various relationships in her and her father's life. Miranda is slowly transitioning from one phase of her life to another which will be completely different from the one she is used to. The change will be a permanent, irreversible one.

Miranda's predicament after Ferdinand's visit mirrors Ariel's struggle under Prospero. Both desire the forbidden fruit, forbidden in this case by none other than Prospero. Because Prospero was the one who freed him from Sycorax's imprisonment, the fairy is indebted to him and must serve him as master in order to pay him back. Ariel likes Prospero but it is clear from his words that his desire for freedom is far more desperate. Serving Prospero is a step for him to attain what he truly wants. While one of the most obvious reasons for Ariel's bullying of Caliban could be the mistreatment he suffered at Sycorax's hands, another reason perhaps is the fact that this is the closest he can be, to do as he pleases without going against Prospero. It could even be Ariel taking out his frustration at Prospero and Caliban. Compared to Miranda, Ariel is far more agitated about the in-between space he is in. This could be attributed to the idea that the island is a bitter memory for Ariel, something which he longs to leave behind. Ariel's longing for change and his freedom makes him abide by Prospero's orders. The island can be considered a physical manifestation of the liminality of his situation and the betwixt state of his emotions.

For both fairy and prince, the island promises a change they can look forward to. A change from their current grueling physical or anguished emotional situation to a new, happier situation. However, Ariel is yet to reach there. This puts him in an in-between state - neither here nor there. Thus, Ariel remains in the liminal place far longer than Ferdinand and only achieves freedom at the very end of the play. In this sense, no one on the island has been in the liminal space as long as Ariel has been. They're inherently different from Caliban who stays in the stagnant mindset of a slave. He simply desires a different master and cannot comprehend or imagine himself as completely free. Even when he is excited about freedom, he means freedom under a new master.



CALIBAN. Ban 'Ban, Ca-Caliban,
Has a new master-Get a new man.
Freedom, high day! high-day, freedom!
freedom, high-day, freedom! (Act II Scene 2)

However, it might be concluded that only Caliban's mind is thus, because fundamentally he exists in multiple liminal spaces. For example, to quote Stephano, "*a man or fish?*", upon first encountering Caliban. He is portrayed as a savage, someone who is not fully man but not fully a beast either. Being the colonized he also carries the resentment of being restricted in his own land and being treated as a slave. After Prospero's arrival he is not the master of the island he grew up in and neither can he accept his demotion as a slave. It's his land and yet it's not. Moreover, at the end of the novel, Caliban does realize the foolishness of treating the drunkard Stephano as his king. This suggests Caliban's potential journey from a negative liminal space to better understanding of himself and his mindset.

CALIBAN. I'll be wise hereafter, And seek for grace.
What a thrice-double ass Was I to take this drunkard for a god,
And worship this dull fool. (Act V Scene 1)

Compared to Caliban, Antonio and Sebastian seem to be stuck in a negative liminal space even at the end. There is no mention of either regretting their actions, only Alonso's regret. Both younger brothers remain at the threshold of temptation but at the end they both miss their opportunity at transformation and continue to remain in the liminal space even after their exit from the island. The island blurring the constraints of reality also seems to have blurred their already lacking morality. What with Antonio instigating Sebastian to murder his brother and Sebastian being ready to do the treacherous act, the island certainly exposed both of their greedy and ambitious nature to attain anything they desired at any cost.

One could say that the character that has been in the liminal space almost as long as Ariel, is Prospero. From the moment he set foot on the island his goal has been revenge. The island becomes the physical liminal space where he accomplishes this goal. In another sense, the island signifies his journey from revenge to forgiveness. The twelve years he burned and thirsted for revenge fall short before Ariel's words and his own gentle nature. It would seem his love for his brother is far stronger than his thirst for vengeance. He forgoes the impulse for retribution and chooses the path of compassion and remission instead.

Opens at Nightfall
Closes at Dawn

In *The Night Circus*, perhaps the most liminal aspect of the circus is its functioning at night. A blurring of the constraints of reality since circuses are generally a daytime pastime. But the *Le Cirque des Rêves* defies any sense of normality by going against this. The circus itself is built in accordance with one word - "Dreamlike". The circus blurs illusion and reality too, the audience is often open mouthed at the feats they witness at the circus. The impossible is achieved, all laws of physics are broken, and perception can be described as fluid at best if not liquid. This places the circus itself in the grey area between the known and the unknown, arousing the sense of mystery in its spectators. The circus evokes childlike wonder and awe in all of its patrons but these miraculous sights and feats are a result of the dangerous and exhausting duel between Celia and Marco. Thus, the circus exists in a liminal space where perception exists somewhere between childish innocence and hidden facets of a menacing



truth. Why, the very structure of the tent itself casts an image of temporariness and flux. The circus arrives without warning, because it exists outside the spaces of reality. “You think, as you walk away from Le Cirque des Rêves and into the creeping dawn, that you felt more awake within the confines of the circus. You think, perhaps, you are still dreaming” (Christon, 490).

As the island is the transitional space for Miranda, so is the circus to Celia Bowen but where the island is somewhat a happier liminal space for Shakespeare’s heroine, the circus is both a home and a burden to Celia. Although the circus is a space her father arranged for her challenge, Celia grows to feel more at home within the circus than she ever did with her father. She is caught between being bound to her new family by love and being bound to the game and Marco. Not knowing what to do, she suffers in a liminal space, burdened by doubt and guilt. She is also in a state where her duties as a daughter clash with her choices as an independent woman but the rules of the game pressurize her to act towards the goal of being a victor.

Ironically, Celia’s magical forte is illusion. She seamlessly weaves illusion into the fabric of reality, creating awe-inspiring magic for her audience. Like her magic, Celia too exists in a liminal area. She’s not fully at any point in time, any of her identities. While she does feel at home in the circus, she cannot let her guard down. She loves Marco but the very existence of the circus demands not love but competitiveness from her. Unlike Miranda who fully trusts her father, Celia is different. Having grown up to emotional neglect and physical abuse in the name of teaching, she has a love-hate relationship with her father. She simply competes because her father ordered her to do so but also because she doesn’t know what else she is to do. In this way too, the grey zone she is in is a liminal space of sorts echoing the feeling of uncertainty she feels throughout the book.

Finally, to protect Marco and herself from the rules of the challenge, she gives up her life along with Marco, turning them both into spirits and then binding them to the circus, making it their touchstone. The essence of the circus which resides within Celia when she was human and in her initial moments as a spirit becomes stuck in the liminal space when she suspends it so that it wouldn’t collapse and she and Marco can find another caretaker (Bailey) for it. Spirits are literally a manifestation of liminality and by tying them to circus, Celia makes it that even after death the circus is her liminal realm and she herself is a liminal entity and the circus, a direct reflection of this. It is as Widget says to the man in the grey suit towards the end of the novel.

Neither of them are dead,” Widget continues. “But they’re not that either.” He nods at the window. “They’re in the circus. They *are* the circus. You can hear his footsteps in the Labyrinth. You can smell her perfume in the Cloud Maze. It’s marvelous (Blakemore, 479).

Although, one has created it, Prospero, the Enchanter does not reside in the circus fully. By the time the challenge begins, he has become a ghost, a failed experiment of his own. The Night Circus is in a way similar to the storm created by Prospero in the play than the island. Both were created for the purpose of a single man, going against nature’s laws. However, Prospero the Enchanter is elemental in creating the Night Circus as the liminal space it is. This makes him basically different from Prospero the Duke, who was on the island and played a key role in the happenings on it. “His hand fades completely and then returns” (Blakemore, 52). As it is with Caliban in *The Tempest*, and Celia Bowen, Isobel Martin too is caught up between multiple states. Being a fortune teller, she has an idea of the dawning future but is helpless as she cannot in any



way change it. She is particularly helpless when it comes to her feelings for Marco who in turn is attracted to Celia. Eventually, it is this unrequited love and the subsequent hurt she undergoes that tips over the precarious equilibrium and breaks the protective charm she cast long ago and always maintained. Her heartbreak throws her from a balancing figure to a cause of disruption which immediately ends up killing Herr Theisen. The chaos within the circus that night mirrors the feeling of nowhere and ephemerality Isobel suddenly experiences. Similarly, just like Celia she experiences the betwixt feeling of being at home within the circus but the knowledge of why it exists in the first-place chafes at her. She too is always on guard.

Most of all, the circus mirrors the liminality of her relationship with Marco. When Isobel first joined the circus, it was as Marco's lover and hence to keep an eye on Celia, but as time passes by, she becomes aware of the growing attraction between Marco and Celia. Their creations within the circus, once part of the competition, slowly morph into exchanged love letters. Meanwhile Marco's letters to Isobel also dwindle down. The circus is a true representation of Isobel standing at the threshold of knowledge but not having crossed it fully until she finally leaves the circus when she ultimately acknowledges the truth about Marco and his love for Celia.

Compared to Celia and Isobel, Marco Alisdair certainly experiences liminality comparatively less, similar to Ferdinand. This could be because he was not physically present in the Night Circus as long as Celia or Isobel. But he does get caught between being an observer and participant. In the beginning, he participates in the challenge while hiding his identity. He disguises himself as Chandresh's assistant and behaves like an outsider, an onlooker. As things get intense in terms of the challenge as well as his feelings for his opponent, he starts to visit the circus more, interact with it more and have a deeper connection with it. He is neither an outsider nor insider onlooker nor performer. Moreover, along with Celia, he also transforms into a spirit that is tied to the circus, essentially existing in two realms in the circus - the physical realm of earth and the afterlife.

Tsukiko, the contortionist of the circus, was part of the previous challenge. It is clear from her few dialogues that while she did win, it was not as she wished for it to end. It is implied that she and her rival also harbored some affection for each other, and in an act of love her rival sacrificed her own life to make Tsukiko win and end the game once and for all. Tsukiko is the only character besides Isobel that has an unseen yet mystique presence. She understands the circus as the stage of the challenge. And like Isobel she too knows but cannot and does not interfere until the moment it is inevitable. She offers the choice of death to Marco knowing he would choose it because then Celia would get to live. For Tsukiko, the circus is a dire reminder of her own past, never allowing her to move forward but at the same time she doesn't seem to want to forget it either. Her job as a contortionist in the circus is also a liminality of sorts. Tsukiko's abilities are described as something extraordinary - she defies the limits of normal human physiology, making her someone outside the realms of humanity but at the same time, inside it for at the end she is human. It can be concluded that perhaps the challenge always leaves a lasting impact on its participants and Tsukiko, Celia, Marco are no exception in more ways than one.

The Murray twins on the other hand, are a direct product of the circus's teeming powerful magic. Having been born the Opening Night, it is quite possibly the confluence of so much powerful magic from as many powerful magicians as were gathered there that night, that imbued the twins with the unique magic they possessed from childhood. Poppet sees flashes of the future and Widget sees flashes of the past. The twins and the circus are similar reflections of liminality. The present of the twins is inevitably woven with past and present, making them feel out of place. Seeing things not meant for them so early in life, leaves them feeling not like a child nor fully adult. They're caught in a limbo state. Poppet, who sees the future, exists in a sadder liminal space than Widget. Not knowing anything about the challenge, she worries much about a future where



she cannot understand where her home, the circus, is in danger. Poppet and Widget are children, but their unique abilities throw them into adulthood too fast for them to make sense. The circus is a liminal manifestation of this disorientation and uncertainty that they experience.

The circus is a physical manifestation of Bailey's mind's confinement and eventual freedom. The circus is his dream, but his future is already decided for him by his parents, and he almost gives up on the circus. For Bailey, the circus symbolizes his unknown future, the unpredictability he faces. The circus is a direct reflection of the personal betwixt-ness he undergoes, whether he should choose the ordinary life his parents expect of him or the enchanting but extraordinary life the circus represents. The circus is the manifestation of Bailey's liminal predicament - between predictable and unpredictable. The circus is a perfect liminal space even in terms of architecture. The descriptions give it a fluid like feel and the colors used – black and white are perhaps used to symbolize feelings of dreaminess and haze the circus arouses in people. It is neither fully black nor fully white symbolizing a lack of fixed identity. Moreover, the constant usage of the word “dreamlike” to describe the circus also puts it into a liminal space.

To conclude, the island in *The Tempest* and the circus in *The Night Circus* are spaces that are extremely liminal. They are places arousing grief and uncertainty.. No one is just one identity, expressing or experiencing one emotion; there are so many layers even to the smallest act as there are repercussions. Just like the circus's color palette, the lies could be black and the truth white, but there is also the grey, which hints at the liminality of the circus. The very opening of the circus at twilight (neither day nor night) confirms its liminality. The island physically exists while Prospero and Ariel's work parallelly exist, highlighting the dual existence and happenings of the island. Their illusions are a mirror to the liminality of the circus. The limbo state of various characters, standing between two or more than two choices in both play and novel is very similar. Every character undergoes some kind of transformation as they exit the physical boundaries of the aforementioned space. This transformation can be painful as in the case of Ariel or liberation as in the case of the two unfortunate lovers, Celia Bowen and Marco Alisdair. It is liberation from the feeling of betwixt-ness that circus and the island aroused in its inhabitants. But while they are part of the physical space, the readers can clearly see the lack of movement associated with liminality, where one is essentially caught between two defined concepts of himself. This can be metaphorical, literal and emotional.

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