The Genre
The Winter’s Tale was originally included in the Comedies section of the First Folio of 1623, but since the 19th century it has been categorized as one of Shakespeare’s romances. Written later in his career, the romance plays are among his final works and consist of Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter’s Tale, and The Tempest. Frequently referred to as tragicomedies, these plays are, for the most part, tragedies with happy endings.

Lovers and concerns of love do feature in the late romances, however the romances aren’t strictly love stories but rather epic tales of redemption and reconciliation, faith and family, vice and virtue, in which love is the impetus for a great journey leading to an emotional reunion. The slings and arrows as well as the unparalleled joy of familial love take narrative center stage with romantic love playing more of a supporting role.

Shortly after writing his romances, Shakespeare himself would journey from London back to his home in Stratford to rejoin his family in retirement. Perhaps this imminent life change gives us some insight into the motivation behind these genre-defying masterpieces and Shakespeare’s desire to reunite families torn asunder.

The History
The shift in Shakespeare’s writing from the period of high tragedy to romance signals a shift in the British monarchy from the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) to James I (1603-1625). In Shakespeare’s time, the reigning monarch had enormous influence over the art that was produced. The queen loved tragedies, as did the predominantly lower-class audiences of the Globe, while the romances exemplified the new king’s more light-hearted, decadent, and rather less bloodthirsty taste. At the same
time, Shakespeare and his company of actors moved from the public Globe to the private Blackfriars, an upscale indoor theatre lit by candles and outfitted with all the bells and whistles of the age. Admission was six times the price of the cheapest ticket at the Globe, and thus the plays were geared towards a much wealthier and more sophisticated audience, with fewer decapitations and eye-gougings, more courtly charades and sheep-shearing festivals. Also at this time, his company ceased to be the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and became The King’s Men by royal decree. They performed at the court of King James more than any other company and even staged The Winter’s Tale as part of the celebration of his daughter’s wedding to the future King of Bohemia.

The Poetry
The romances mark a discernible shift in the style of Shakespeare’s language. His later plays are increasingly poetically complex as his mastery of blank verse reaches its zenith. The rhythm of the verse is complicated and highly irregular. He approaches the meter with a kind of exultant freedom, distilling elaborate speeches to their most economical and concentrated form. Shakespeare had long used irregular rhythms to indicate an irregular state of mind, but in the romances his creativity with meter transcends itself. Speech often mirrors plot, leading us meticulously towards the climax while patiently revealing its true shape only at the very end. The Winter’s Tale is, perhaps, the most splendid example of this rhythmic and rhetorical virtuosity.

In Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, renowned literary critic and Shakespeare scholar Harold Bloom attests that the play “surges with Shakespeare’s full power,” and lovingly crowns it “poem unlimited.”