

Table top shakespeare: the tempest

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Connections between stories highlight the continuity of intrinsically human concerns throughout time. Hag-Seed being an adaptation of Shakespeare's The Tempest inevitably means there are many parallels. However, being composers of very different contextual periods, Shakespeare and Atwood express different values and perspectives on particular issues. While Shakespeare's tale is shaped by his theatrical Christian humanist context of England under James I, Atwood is influenced by her more egalitarian, democratic 21st century world. As a reader, it can be understood that Atwood has intentionally woven contextual elements into Hag-Seed to bring sharpened relevance to the transformative powers of art, contemporary power imbalances and humanist values.

In Shakespeare's context, the art of magic was of great cultural significance. In the Tempest, art is shown as a mechanism for manipulation by Prospero as well as an outlet to spark self-reflection and empathy. Prospero uses visual and aural illusions to manipulate his enemies and expose their true selves. From conjuring up the storm in the opening of the play to the illusion of a Banquet, Prospero's magic gives him total control over others. At one point, Prospero even goes so far as to suggest that all of life is an illusion that vanishes with death: ' We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep'. Atwood introduces a new kind of magic to a contemporary audience in order to continue Shakespeare's conversation about the unclear line between illusion and reality. Atwood explores how magic-like qualities can be created using special effects and technological advancements of her modern world. She also plays into drug culture and the hallucinatory effects of such recreational, illicit drugs that have become of

significant interest in recent years. Felix is able to conjure his own type of magic through the help of 8Handz, who uses audio and visual effects to trick Tony and Sal into seeing things that are not really there. Here, Atwood asserts how the same issues can pervade humanity, although our changing cultural and technological paradigms certainly can influence the ways in which this is true.

Perhaps, a more recognisable “ magic” that exists in both the play and the novel is the magic of art and the form of theatre. The power of performance and art lies in its ability to fashion alternate worlds and shape realities that have the potential to produce. As Felix’s plays in the novel, “ the collective indrawn breath, the collective sigh,” but also to allow us to know ourselves better. Perhaps, this is the most important connection one must make whilst formulating a Textual Conversations essay. Both Shakespeare and Atwood illustrate the ways in which art can unite people, can candidly portray the worst of humanity whilst inspiring hope that we may choose to change - Shakespeare by creating this unbelievable, magical world of “ oh, wonder!” despite telling grounded stories about humanity’s inherent downfalls and Atwood by immortalising the original text, presenting it in a new fashion to ultimately prove that theatre is as impactful today as it was in 1611.

However, the art of theatre helps the reader understand the world as a stage and ourselves as actors with agency and individual choice.

Atwood’s modernised humanist concerns shows there is still a focus on humanist concepts, although it has shifted. Shakespeare’s context was heavily Christian humanism while Atwood’s time involved secular humanism.

This is reflected in the themes of forgiveness and mercy in both texts, as well as the education and rehabilitation of prisoners in *Hag-seed*. While we are prone to inherently human desires of revenge and greed, the characters, like us, are able to choose different outcomes. Ultimately, it is only when Prospero breaks the cycle of violence by refusing to take revenge on Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian, or Caliban that the political tensions in the play are calmed and reconciled. After Prospero's merciful refusal to seek revenge, Alonso and Prospero quickly come to an understanding and unite their once warring cities through the marriage of their children. *The Tempest* suggests that compromise and compassion are more effective political tools than violence, imprisonment, or even magic. Atwood's context of Secular humanism portrays her belief in humanity through Felix rehabilitating and educating the prisoners on Shakespeare. It is also demonstrated through Felix's mercy on Tony by teaching his son, Freddie about the theatre. Like Felix chose to teach Shakespeare, Atwood also chose to adapt Shakespeare as she recognised the thematical parallels in her own context. Theatre to shape realities, Unveiling the complexities of power imbalances is an issue that concerned both Atwood and Shakespeare. *The Tempest* was written during a time of rapid colonisation for Europe, which Shakespeare explores through the complex and problematic relationship between Prospero as coloniser and Caliban as the colonised. Their dynamic is founded on a power imbalance between the two, with Prospero taking on the superior role of teacher to lift Caliban out of "savagery".

To Caliban, however, Prospero merely represents oppression and abuse of power, eventually turning him bitter and violent, which only reinforces

Prospero's view of him as a 'savage.' In Hag-seed, Atwood has replaced the power stemming from colonialism to political power. By integrating ideas of Machiavellian machinations and corruption, she is able to make comment on issues that plague the modern political scene. This is evident in the manner Felix is vacated out of his position at the theatre. It is also expressed through Felix's superiority over the prisoners as a free man and his control over the theatre program at Fletcher Correctional. However, Atwood also uses her more progressive context to comment on social inequalities in Shakespeare's context. Rather than the animalistic treatment of Caliban in *The Tempest*, Atwood uses Leggs to question ideas of racism and inequality when he states "Why's he have to suffer so much for being what he is? It's like he's, you know, black or native or something. He never asked to get born." Through this connection, it is almost as though Atwood is telling Shakespeare and her readers that some issues seem to pervade humanity no matter how many centuries have passed and successfully given *The Tempest* new meaning to the implications of power, politics and revenge to suit a more contemporary, Western audience. What we can draw from this relationship between texts and their contexts is that, whilst many issues are relevant to a universal audience, the intentional connections between them allows us to reinvent specifically what they mean to us. Atwood's recontextualization not only transports Shakespeare's work to a new generation but it allows her to make commentary on issue that are pertinent to her own context. It creates a richer reading experience by deepening our capacity to find new meanings and interpretations of *The Tempest*.