

# **Hag-Seed Study Guide**

## **Hag-Seed by Margaret Atwood**

(c)2017 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">Hag-Seed Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">I. Dark Backward.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">II. A Brave Kingdom.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">III. These Our Actors.....</a>	<a href="#">11</a>
<a href="#">IV. Rough Magic.....</a>	<a href="#">14</a>
<a href="#">V. This Thing of Darkness and Epilogue: Set Me Free.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">21</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>

# Plot Summary

Atwood, Margaret. Hag-Seed. London: Hogarth, 2016. Kindle AZW file.

Shakespeare, William. The Tempest. Eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2007.

Hag-Seed tells the story of Felix, a theatre director ousted from his job at a Canadian theatre festival, who begins teaching Shakespeare at a prison and plots his revenge against the men who betrayed him while staging a production of *The Tempest*.

Part I – “Dark Backward” – explains Felix’s backstory. His wife Nadia died in childbirth and his daughter Miranda died of complications from meningitis when she was three years old. After these events, Felix became obsessed with staging an outlandish production of *The Tempest* in which he would play the protagonist Prospero, who also has a daughter named Miranda. Unbeknownst to Felix, his assistant Tony was plotting to take over his job by slowly taking on more of the administrative and financial aspects of the role, as Felix became more and more preoccupied with *The Tempest*.

One day Tony informed Felix that the board had decided to replace Felix with Tony as artistic director and that they would be cancelling his production of *The Tempest*. Felix moved to an isolated rural house and began to plot his revenge. He imagined that his daughter Miranda was still alive and had conversations with her when he was alone. Fearing he was becoming too isolated, Felix took a job teaching Shakespeare in a prison.

In Part II – “A Brave Kingdom” – Felix has successfully staged three plays with the Fletcher Correctional Players in the prison. His boss informs him that some politicians, including Tony, will be viewing this year’s production in order to decide whether the program should continue. Felix announces he intends to stage *The Tempest* for this year’s production. Felix hires an actress named Anne-Marie to play the part of Miranda and assigns the rest of the characters to the students in the prison. Felix will play Prospero.

In Part III – “These Our Actors” – the cast rehearse the play and Felix comes up with a plan to get his revenge against Tony when he attends the performance. In Part IV – “Rough Magic” – Felix and the cast prepare for the production. The politicians, including Tony, arrive at the prison. Instead of a screening of a pre-recorded performance of *The Tempest* they are subjected to an immersive theatrical experience in which the cast (under Felix’s direction) stage a phony prison riot, making the men fear for their lives, while they also continue to perform extracts from *The Tempest*. Felix catches Tony on camera suggesting that he and another man should murder one of the other politicians and blame it on the prison riot. Felix uses this as leverage to blackmail Tony, get his job back as Artistic Director of the theatre festival, and secure future funding for the Fletcher Correctional Players.



In Part V - "This Thing of Darkness" – the cast celebrate their success at saving the program and give their final reports about *The Tempest*. In the Epilogue, Felix has his job back at the theatre festival and is making plans to go on a cruise where he will give lectures about the Fletcher Correctional Players. Felix finally lets go of the ghost of his daughter Miranda.



# I. Dark Backward

## Summary

Hag-Seed is a modern day retelling of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare which updates the themes and some of the plot from the original play to take place in contemporary Canada, where theatre director Felix is fired from his role as Artistic Director at a small-town theatre festival after the devious plotting of his employee Tony. Exiled from the theatrical world, Felix plots his revenge while teaching drama in a prison.

The novel begins with the Prologue entitled “Screening,” and it takes place in March 2013. The Prologue details a section from a performance of *The Tempest*, featuring some words and phrases from the original play as well as modern day language and stage directions. A storm destroys a boat and the sailors on board panic, before the performance is interrupted by a power cut that alarms the audience. Shots are fired and a voice commands the audience to stay quiet and not move.

Chapter 1 takes place in January 2013. Felix prepares himself for work, muses on his loss of status and financial resources, and indulges in bitterness about the success of a man named Tony.

Chapter 2 recounts how Tony managed to take over as Artistic Director of the Makeshiweg Theatre festival from Felix by taking on many of the administrative and financial responsibilities of Felix’s job. Although Felix thought that Tony was helping him with his role, he was really plotting to usurp him. Felix’s wife Nadia had died in childbirth leaving him as a single parent to his daughter Miranda. When Miranda died from complications of meningitis when she was only three years old, Felix dedicated all of his time and energy to an elaborate production of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare in which he would play the lead role of Prospero. In Chapter 3, before rehearsals began for *The Tempest*, Tony informed Felix that he was replacing him as Artistic Director and that the production was cancelled. In Chapter 4, Felix was escorted to his car by security and one member of the board, a man named Lonnie Gordon, followed him to return his costume for the production.

In Chapter 5, Felix rented a dilapidated rural house from a local farming family, in which he lived alone. In Chapter 6, Felix opened bank accounts in a new name. He concluded that the only two things he had left to live for were his desire to stage *The Tempest* and to get revenge against Tony. In Chapter 7, Felix obsessively tracked Tony’s career through the papers and on the internet. He began to imagine how old his daughter Miranda would have been if she had lived and he started to speak to her as if she were really there. One day he heard her singing outside the house and concluded that the illusion had gone too far and it was time to reconnect with society.



In Chapter 8, nine years after being fired from the theatre festival, Felix applied for a job teaching Shakespeare in a prison. He told the interviewer, Estelle, his fake name but she recognized him and agreed to keep his identity a secret. Three years later, Felix had successfully staged Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and Richard III with his theatre company The Fletcher Correctional Players. The plays could not be presented to a live audience so they were filmed in advance and screened on televisions to the other prisoners.

Chapter 9 takes place during 2013, the fourth year that Felix has been running the theatre program at Fletcher Correctional. In Felix's mind, Miranda is now 15 years old. Felix looks at his costume from the failed production of *The Tempest* hanging in his closet, but closes the door on it once more.

## Analysis

The Prologue introduces an element of dramatic tension by detailing an event that occurs much later in the novel, before jumping back in time and communicating everything that occurred leading up to these events. This mimics the structure of *The Tempest*. At the opening of *The Tempest*, the audience is immediately thrust into the middle of the action during a catastrophic storm that is in the process of destroying a ship and endangering the life of all of the crew onboard. Rather than elaborating on who these characters are or what they are doing at sea, Shakespeare focuses on the drama and fear of the storm to initially grab his audience, before turning to the characters of Prospero and Miranda to provide the backstory and an explanation of who the men on the boat are and what has caused the storm.

Likewise, in *Hag-Seed*, the author begins the novel with the dramatic and fear-inducing occurrence of the performance of *The Tempest* being interrupted by people with apparently violent intentions, before jumping back in the timeline of the story to explain how all of this came to be. The author offers an explanation for this decision in the form of a comment from a class member later in the novel, who argues that the opening scene between Prospero and Miranda is boring and takes too long to communicate the story. Rather than giving a brief summary as a backstory for Felix, the author devotes a large percentage of the novel to communicating the build-up to the events that mirror the events of *The Tempest*, rather than only referring to the backstory in passing.

In *Hag-Seed*, the character of Felix is the equivalent of the character of Prospero in *The Tempest*.

Part 1, "Dark Kingdom," does not correspond with any of the events in *The Tempest* itself. Instead, the section elaborates on the backstory of *The Tempest*, updating what happened to Prospero that led to him being stranded on the magical island. Instead of being ousted from a dukedom and cast away at sea by his brother Antonio, as happens to Prospero in the play, Felix is ousted from his role as Artistic Director at the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival by his deputy Tony. The equivalence between the



characters of Antonio and Tony is communicated through their names, Tony being an informal shortened version of the name Antonio.

Lonnie Gordon, who brings Felix his costume and props after he is fired from his job at the festival, is the equivalent of the character of Gonzalo in *The Tempest*. Like Lonnie, Gonzalo comes to the aid of Prospero when Antonio banishes him from Milan. Gonzalo brings Prospero his books of magic, knowing how much they mean to him and Lonnie brings Felix his costume and props to Felix for the same reason. In both cases, the items delivered to Prospero/Felix by Gonzalo/Lonnie will be an essential part of the former characters' plan to take their revenge on Antonio/Tony later in the story.

The dilapidated farmhouse into which Felix moves after losing his job is the equivalent of the island for Prospero. It is the location where Felix will spend his years of isolation plotting his revenge against those who have done him wrong. Felix has several desires at this stage in the novel, most notably his desire to get vengeance against Tony and his desire to stage his version of *The Tempest* at last. However, Felix's real need is to recover from his grief over his daughter's death and move on with his life. These goals are mirrors of Prospero's goals in *The Tempest*: although Prospero is motivated by his desire for revenge against Antonio, he is also committed to improving the life prospects of his daughter Miranda. Using the same name for Felix's daughter underscores the link between these two characters. The choice of name also suggests that Felix's decision to stage a play in which he plays the father of a character called Miranda is a reaction to his grief and that letting go of the play will be an essential part of his recovery from bereavement.

## Discussion Question 1

To what extent was Felix responsible for losing his job as Artistic Director?

## Discussion Question 2

How do the events of Felix's life mirror the events of Prospero's life that occurred prior to the start of *The Tempest*? How do they differ?

## Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the character of Tony in the novel?

## Vocabulary

illusion, fakery, luxurious, gleaming, wielding, devious, clambering, delegate, Machiavellian, numinous, verge, syllable, efficient, distaste, foppish, fluttering, pennants, ornamented, archaic, extruded



## II. A Brave Kingdom

### Summary

In Chapter 10, Felix attends a meeting with Estelle, the woman who appointed him to his job at Fletcher Correctional. Estelle tells him that the program is under review and that some politicians, including Tony and a former Heritage Minister named Sal O’Nally who was an enemy of Felix, would be attending a screening of this year’s production. Felix convinces Estelle not to tell the men his real name and announces that he intends to do *The Tempest* as this year’s play.

In Chapter 11, Felix goes to work and the security guards ask him about what play he will do this year. Chapter 12, details the layout and security details of the set of rooms that Felix uses to stage his productions. In Chapter 13, Felix meets this year’s intake for his theatre class. He tells them about the play and about the requirements for the class. The class has read the play in advance and they complain to Felix that they do not like it as much as they liked the tragedies they have performed in previous years. In particular, they complain that no one wants to play Miranda. Felix announces that he will be hiring an actress to play Miranda. Felix asks the class to make a list of all the curse words featured in *The Tempest* and instructs them that they may only use those words as curse words for the duration of the course. In Chapter 14, the students list all of the curse words they found in *The Tempest*.

In Chapter 15, Felix meets with an actress named Anne-Marie who was supposed to play Miranda in his original production of *The Tempest* at the Makeshiweg Theatre festival. He asks her if she will perform with the Fletcher Correctional Players and she agrees. In Chapter 16, Felix shows the class a Youtube video of Anne-Marie dancing, in which it is clear that she is physically very strong and athletic. The class discusses the role of Ariel and, after some persuasion from Felix, all of them are interested in playing the part. In Chapter 17, Felix returns to his home alone and imagines that he is speaking with Miranda. Felix plays chess with Miranda.

In Chapter 18, Felix lectures the class about *The Tempest* and the nature of the island on which it is set. He discusses all of the principal characters in the play and asks the class to put a number next to each character to indicate who they would most like to play in the production. Felix says something out loud that he meant to only say in his own mind, momentarily causing a few of the class to stare at him. In Chapter 19, Felix confronts the difficult fact that too many of the class wish to play the part of Caliban. Felix tries to convince them that Caliban is a more difficult and complex role than they realize. He sets the class a task of finding as many different kinds of prisons in the play as they can.





## Analysis

Chapter 10 is subtitled “Auspicious star,” a reference to a line in *The Tempest* in which Prospero explains to Miranda that “By accident most strange, bountiful fortune / (Now, my dear lady) hath mine enemies / Brought to this shore; and by my prescience / I find my zenith doth depend upon / A most auspicious star” (1.2.178-182). After losing everything due to the misdeeds of his brother, Prospero accidentally finds himself in a position to change his fortunes and take his revenge. The auspicious star is his chance to make a difference in the fate of himself and Miranda and he feels he must take it or forever suffer the lowliness of their current position.

For Felix in *Hag-Seed*, the auspicious star comes in the form of Estelle announcing that Tony will come within Felix’s realm of influence at the end of this year’s production. Although Felix has watched Tony from afar for many years, this is the first and probably only chance he will ever get to directly influence an aspect of Tony’s life. Like Prospero, Felix feels that he must grab this chance to change his fortunes.

Throughout the novel, the author makes comparisons between Prospero’s goblins who he commands to do his bidding on the island in his pursuit of revenge against Antonio, with the prisoners in Felix’s theatre class who Felix commands in his pursuit of revenge against Tony. Felix’s status as an overlord or commander of these men is underscored by his self-interested decision to stage *The Tempest*. It is not a necessary part of his revenge against Tony to stage this particular play (the cast could just as easily frighten and intimidate the men with a version of *Titus Andronicus* or *Henry V*) but Felix’s egotistical devotion to the idea of staging *The Tempest* causes him to use his authority to oblige the prisoners to perform a show that is relevant to his life and circumstances rather than theirs.

This fact is underscored by the protests on the first day of class, when the students complain that they felt a more visceral and straightforward connection to the choice of plays in earlier years (*Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Richard III*) which they felt were more relevant to their lives. However, like Prospero, Felix is not entirely self-centered and he goes to great lengths to explain to the class how *The Tempest* is relevant to their own situation in life, specifically by discussing all of the different prisons, prisoners, and jailers, that can be found throughout the text.

Although Felix’s daughter Miranda shares a name with a character in *The Tempest*, she is not the equivalent of *The Tempest*’s Miranda in the novel. Anne-Marie is the equivalent of Miranda in the novel, whom Felix feels protective towards but who insists on striking out on her own and making her own decisions in spite of him. Felix’s daughter Miranda is the equivalent of the character Ariel in *The Tempest*. The questions of whether Miranda/Ariel are real entities or projections of Felix and Prospero’s disturbed minds is never directly answered in either text. Both are supernatural beings who help guide their masters on their course of revenge and influence them to behave in more humane and compassionate ways.



## Discussion Question 1

Why does Felix select *The Tempest* for this year's play? What personal resonances does the text hold for him?

## Discussion Question 2

Does the theater program have a positive impact on the lives of the students? Why?

## Discussion Question 3

What impact does the ghostly presence of Miranda have on the novel?

## Vocabulary

hermits, convoy, prolonged, intense, stellar, designated, dejection, contraband, thespian, doddering, shackles, composition, rehabilitation, obnoxious, infer, apprehensive, troupe, purloiner, embezzlement, structure



## III. These Our Actors

### Summary

Chapter 20, is a chart listing eight sets of prisoners, prisons, and jailers that the class was able to find within *The Tempest*. In Chapter 21, Felix informs the class that they missed one example of a prison. Felix promises to tell them what it is after the production is over. The class discusses the reasons they dislike the main character in *The Tempest*: Prospero. They discuss the goblins in the play that Prospero commands to harass and distress his enemies and Felix imagines using the members of his class to do the same to Tony and Sal.

In Chapter 22, Felix writes a document detailing which class members have been cast in which part and what crime each of them has been convicted of. In Chapter 23, Felix gives the document to Anne-Marie. In Chapter 24, Anne-Marie accompanies Felix to a rehearsal at the prison for the first time. Felix tells the class which parts they will play. Felix asks one of the class known as 8Handz, who was convicted of cyber security crimes, what equipment he would need to set up closed-circuit surveillance in their rehearsal space. 8Handz says he will give Felix a list of things to buy. Felix promises 8Handz that he will get him early parole if he helps him.

In Chapter 25, the production runs into a series of minor difficulties that make Felix anxious. The members of the class who are studying the character of Antonio have written a modern-language update of the backstory to *The Tempest* and they perform it for Felix. In Chapter 26, Felix visits various stores to purchase costumes and props for the play. He goes to a toy store to buy three dolls to use as the goddesses. Felix finds this experience very difficult because it reminds him of his dead daughter Miranda. Later that day, in Chapter 27, Felix explains his purchases to Miranda. Miranda reads *The Tempest* and tells him that she wants to be Miranda in the play, but Felix tells her that it is not possible.

In Chapter 28, 8Handz demonstrates the security system he has set-up to Felix. The group studying the role of Caliban has written a rap about his backstory which they perform for Felix. In Chapter 29, Felix wonders whether it is time to give up his illusion that Miranda is still with him. He continues his internet stalking of Tony. He goes into his wardrobe and takes out his old costume for Prospero: a robe and a staff. He tries them on. He runs through some of Prospero's lines and, in his mind, he hears Miranda responding with Ariel's lines. Miranda has decided to understudy for Ariel and attend rehearsals with Felix.

### Analysis

The discussion of the various prisons, prisoners, and jailers that can be found within *The Tempest* raises the question of whether Felix's approach towards his students is



ethical. As Prospero's surrogate in the novel, Felix is both a benefactor and a jailer towards the men in his class. Prospero controls his charges in *The Tempest* through threats of pain and torture: he regularly commands his spirits to pinch and torment Caliban if he has taken too long to bring wood inside for the fire, for example.

Felix, in contrast, does not threaten to inflict any physical pain on his students (indeed, his age and strength relative to the men in the class would make this ineffective), so his treatment of the students is not especially comparable to Prospero's treatment of Caliban. However, Felix's relationship with the students is comparable to Prospero's relationship with Ariel. In Act 1 of *The Tempest*, when Ariel complains about Prospero's demands, Prospero asks Ariel, "Dost thou forget / From what a torment I did free thee?" (1.2. 250-251). Prospero reminds Ariel that before he arrived on the island, Ariel was trapped inside a tree by the witch Sycorax.

Since being freed from his prison, Ariel has enjoyed much more freedom and a higher quality of life, despite still being a prisoner to Prospero's demands. This is echoed in the status of the prisoners of the Fletcher Correctional Players. Before Felix begins his classes for each year's production, the students are imprisoned in their cells. When the class begins, Felix offers them greater freedom and enjoyment in their lives, even though they remain prisoners throughout. As Felix has the power to reject or expel them from the class (although this is never explicitly stated or threatened) it makes the power dynamic between Felix and the class comparable to the power dynamic between Prospero and Ariel. Felix is as much of a jailer in relation to the class as he is their teacher.

The focus on the character of Caliban in Part III raises questions for the reader about the extent of the crossover between the characters of Felix and Prospero. The novel, after all, is called *Hag-Seed*, which is a reference to Caliban not to Prospero. Caliban and Prospero are similar characters in many ways. Both feel themselves to be the rightful ruler of the island and both spend the play attempting to execute a plan of revenge against someone who they feel has usurped their rightful title and authority. However, unlike Prospero, Caliban is unsuccessful at his attempts at revenge and arguably ends up in a worsened condition as a result of his revenge plot. When the students discuss Caliban and his attitudes in depth, it raises the question of whether Felix is the surrogate of Prospero in the novel or whether he is the surrogate of Caliban. This adds suspense to the question of whether or not Felix will succeed with his revenge plot (like Prospero) or fail miserably (like Caliban).

## Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of Anne-Marie's character? What role does she play in Felix's life?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the nature of the power dynamic between Felix and the cast?



## Discussion Question 3

Why do so many of the class want to play the role of Caliban?

## Vocabulary

incarceration, scoffing, skepticism, pondering, revels, cagey, disregard, guises, disillusioning, forgery, scrawny, percolating, melding, abysm, rueful, clambers, tentative, ambience, indulgently, monotones

## IV. Rough Magic

### Summary

In Chapter 30, Felix's daughter Miranda accompanies him to the prison for the first time. Felix runs through one of his scenes as Prospero. 8Handz complains that there was some strange feedback on the recording during Ariel's lines.

In Chapter 31, Felix meets with a drug dealer in Toronto and purchases some drugs to assist him enact his revenge on Tony and Sal. Felix has a meeting with Estelle. She tells him that Tony and Sal plan to end the theatrical program at Fletcher. In Chapter 32, Felix speaks to the cast before the arrival of Tony and Sal. He reminds them that they want to end the program. He reminds them of their instructions for when the visitors arrive in their rehearsal space. While everyone else in the prison is watching the video of the production, Felix and the cast will be creating an immersive experience for their visitors that security will not be aware of.

In Chapter 33, Tony and Sal arrive at the prison with Lonnie, another politician named Sebert, and Sal's son Freddie, who is interested in pursuing a career in theatre. Both Sal and Sebert are planning to run for leadership of their political party and Tony is torn about which of them he should support. The four men surrender their phones to the security guards, who give them all panic alarms. They enter the rehearsal space where the cast members greet them in full costume. Felix observes everything through his surveillance cameras and speaks to the cast through earpieces.

Chapter 34, repeats the text of the Prologue. In Chapter 35, the cast drag Freddie away from the rest of the audience. The men realize that their panic alarms have been stolen. Sal realizes that his son, Freddie, has been taken. They hear a gunshot and Sal fears he must be dead. Freddie is locked in a cell. Freddie hears music coming from speakers in the cell: a song sung by Ariel in *The Tempest*. Anne-Marie comes into the cell and tells him that there is a crazy person in the prison who thinks that he is Prospero. He is insisting that they reenact *The Tempest* and that Freddie is Ferdinand. Freddie and Anne-Marie read aloud a scene between Ferdinand and Miranda from *The Tempest*. Freddie asks Anne-Marie if she has a boyfriend.

In Chapter 36, elsewhere in the rehearsal space, Tony, Sal, Sebert, and Lonnie are imprisoned in a cell. Sal mourns Freddie's death while Lonnie tries to convince him that everything is fine. Sal and Lonnie suddenly and mysteriously fall asleep. While they sleep, Tony convinces Sebert that they should murder Sal and blame it on the prison riot, giving Sebert a chance to become party leader. Felix watches everything through his surveillance system and confirms with 8Handz that they recorded the threats. 8Handz plays loud music into the cell to wake up Lonnie and Sal before they get hurt.

In Chapter 37, Tony, Sal, Sebert, and Lonnie are moved to another room in the rehearsal space where they find a bowl of grapes. Three of them begin to eat the



grapes, but Lonnie hears a voice in his ear telling him not to eat them. 8Handz summarizes the various hallucinogenic drugs contained in the grapes as Felix frets about the effects. They play a track of the cast rapping about how the men betrayed Felix. In Chapter 38, Sal, Tony, and Sebert suffer the effects of the drugged grapes and become increasingly disorientated and distressed. Two of the cast come into the room in costume as the characters Stephano and Trinculo. They perform a rap accusing the men of being crooks. 8Handz watches the men and tells Felix that it's too much and he feels sorry for them. Felix hears Miranda's voice telling him that she would feel sorry for them if she were human.

In Chapter 39, the effects of the drugs start to wear off. Felix appears in his Prospero costume and tells them that all of their conversations and actions have been recorded. Felix demands his job back at the theatre festival. He threatens to use the footage to blackmail them unless they agree to continue the Fletcher Correctional Players program and increase its funding. He also asks for early parole for 8Handz. The men agree to the deal. Felix takes them to the cell containing Freddie and Anne-Marie and shows Sal that Freddie is not dead. Freddie introduces Anne-Marie to his dad as his partner.

The four men are escorted out of the rehearsal space where they rejoin the rest of the prison staff for a reception. Felix begins to pack up the equipment alongside 8Handz, who tells him he can hear singing through the headphones. Felix says that it's a song he used to sing to his daughter. Felix gets into his car and drives home. He hears Miranda's voice in the back seat.

## Analysis

Part IV raises further questions about Felix's sanity. Earlier in the novel, he speaks out loud to himself during a rehearsal with the class, leading some of the students to stare at him but not to the extent that anyone asks him who he was speaking to or if he is ok. When Miranda, the ghostly voice of Felix's long-dead daughter, decides to accompany him to rehearsals at the prison, it initially seems as if Felix's delusion will get the better of him and that he will descend into madness while speaking with the ghost in front of others.

Instead of this, something more magical and mysterious occurs when Miranda attends the prison. Although the reader has been convinced up until this point that Miranda is merely a figment of Felix's imagination, events at the prison begin to suggest that she might be a real entity that others are able to sense and detect. This is first suggested in Chapter 30 when 8Handz complains that he can hear feedback on the recording during Ariel's lines as if another voice is speaking them, implying that the voice of Miranda (who has previously announced her intention to understudy as the part of Ariel) can be detected by machines and perhaps even people other than Felix.

Felix's plan at this stage in the novel has become especially far-fetched and unrealistic, but the potential supernatural element of Miranda implies that perhaps this tale is not meant to be read as a work of realism. The extent to which the events of the novel are



naturalistic or supernatural and the extent to which Felix's feelings and beliefs are a product of mental illness are questions that are left open-ended.

Chapter 34 reaches the point at which the novel began in the Prologue, bringing the reader up to date with where the narrative began and everything that has occurred to bring the characters together at this point in time. In this sense, everything up until this point in the novel has been the equivalent of Prospero's conversation with Miranda in Act 1 of *The Tempest* during which he extensively explains the backstory of all of the characters and tells Miranda his reasons for conjuring the tempest that has brought them to the island shore. From Chapter 35 onwards, then, the action of the novel starts to correspond to the action of the rest of *The Tempest*.

The faked prison riot is the novel's equivalent of the storm during the play. Both events instill real fear in the men caught up in them, but in both cases the dramatic incidents are merely illusions that have been orchestrated by Prospero and Felix safe in the knowledge that no one involved will come to any real harm.

Both Prospero and Felix begin by separating a father from his son: Prospero separates Alonso from his son Ferdinand, and Felix separates Sal from his son Freddie. Next, both Alonso and Sal become preoccupied with grief over the apparent deaths of their sons, while the characters of Gonzalo and Lonnie use enthusiasm and optimism to attempt to convince them that everything is probably fine, despite all evidence to the contrary. Following this, in *The Tempest*, Antonio suggests a plot to Sebastian in which they kill the others so that Sebastian can become King of Naples. Likewise in *Hag-Seed*, Tony (somewhat unrealistically) suggests to Sebert that they should murder Sal and Lonnie in their sleep and pretend they died in the prison riot. Rather than having the men put under a spell by a supernatural being (as Prospero does through Ariel) Felix relies on hallucinogenic drugs to achieve the same effect, working the men into a frenzy of despair and confusion before revealing himself and his demands.

Throughout this sequence there are two characters in the novel who function as the equivalent of Ariel in the play. Ariel has many functions in the play. On one level, he is Prospero's servant who does his bidding in order to maintain his own freedom and privileges on the island. This side of Ariel is represented in the novel by 8Handz, the prisoner who was convicted of computer hacking crimes, who helps Felix to install the necessary technology to disorient and record Sal, Tony, and Sebert.

In the play, Ariel also serves the function of being a moral conscience for Prospero when he goes too far, pleading with him while the men are under the spell that "Your charm so strongly works 'em / That, if you beheld the, your affections / Would become tender." (5.1.17-19). When Prospero enquires if that is how Ariel feels about the enchanted men, he replies that he would "were I human" (5.1.19). This function of Ariel's character is the represented in the novel by the ghost of Miranda who speaks in Felix's ear, using Ariel's words from the play, to convince him to have mercy on the men.





## **Discussion Question 1**

In what ways is the character of Ariel adapted for inclusion in the narrative of the novel?

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does Felix's revenge plot mirror Prospero's revenge plot? How does it differ?

## **Discussion Question 3**

What motivates the prisoners to participate in the charade?

## **Vocabulary**

chimes, trance, enacting, overcast, gelid, inexorably, discarded, surmounted, incurred, discreet, magisterial, hypodermic, crucial, poised, redemptive, jostle, prominent, paunchier, minions, interference



## V. This Thing of Darkness and Epilogue: Set Me Free

### Summary

In Chapter 40, Anne-Marie joins Felix for the final class. Felix congratulates them and tells them they have saved the program. The students prepare to give their final reports for the character they have been studying, in which they hypothesize what happens to each of their characters after the end of *The Tempest*.

Chapter 41 is the class report for the character of Ariel. The group suggests that Ariel was part of the elements of the earth, and that in the future he will help to solve climate change. Chapter 42 is the class report for the character of Antonio. The group argues that Antonio would attempt to enact revenge on the way home, murdering Prospero and raping Miranda. Chapter 43 is an improvised report from Anne-Marie about the fate of Miranda, given in response to the class report about Antonio. Performing an athletic dance and martial-arts routine, Anne-Marie argues that Miranda was trained in magic and self-defense while she lived on the island, making her capable of summoning Ariel and fighting off the attack from Antonio and his men.

Chapter 44 is the class report for the character of Gonzalo. The group suggests that Gonzalo was given the opportunity to return to the island with a group of other people to form his own non-hierarchical society. Chapter 45 is the class report for the character of Caliban. The group discusses numerous potential outcomes for this character. First, they suggest that Stephano and Trinculo follow through on their threat in the play to display Caliban as a freak show when they get home. Then they decide that a more positive ending would be preferable. They suggest a version where it turns out that Prospero is Caliban's father. Feeling guilty for his mistreatment of Caliban, Prospero tries to make amends by educating him. Prospero sets Caliban up to be a musician and Caliban becomes a star.

The cast party takes place in Chapter 46. A few of the cast perform a new song for Felix about Caliban, inspired by the report. In Chapter 47, the students remind Felix he has not told them about the ninth prison in *The Tempest* that they failed to identify on the first day. Felix tells them that the play itself is a prison from which Prospero asks the audience to release him through their applause.

In the Epilogue, Felix discovers that the family he rented his house from has abandoned their farm. Felix has his old job back as Artistic Director at the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival. He focuses mainly on the administrative tasks of running the festival and leaves the artistic parts up to Freddie, the new Assistant Director, and Anne-Marie, the chief choreographer. Felix prepares to go on a cruise with Estelle during which he will give lectures about the Fletcher Correctional Players. He plans to take 8Handz along



with him. As he prepares to leave, Felix's vision of Miranda begins to fade. He tells her, "To the elements be free" (283) and she disappears.

## Analysis

The final reports delivered by the class after the production is over serve the dual purpose of offering literary analysis of *The Tempest* as well as offering suggestions and warnings about what could become of the characters in the novel. This is especially the case with the report about the character Antonio from *The Tempest*. As all of the men involved in the composition of this report have themselves been convicted of crimes and sent to prison, they have particularly convincing insights into the mind of a character like Antonio who has been willing in the past to commit crimes in order to further his own interests. The group studying Antonio argues that the events of the play will not be enough to subdue him. They suggest that Prospero's revenge against Antonio will only continue a cycle and that Antonio will exact his own revenge against Prospero on the ship on the way back to Milan.

This raises an ominous question about the fate of their equivalent characters in the novel: Felix and Tony. Will Tony really be happy to abide by the agreement he made with Felix at the end of the fake prison riot? Or will he be plotting his own revenge against Felix which will await the protagonist of the novel at some unspecified moment in the future?

Anne-Marie's improvised class report about the character of Miranda offers a more feminist perspective on the character than is often used in productions of this play. Miranda can be interpreted as a passive character in the play, obediently doing her father's bidding and falling in love with literally the first man she sets eyes on. Anne-Marie's interpretation, however, focuses on smaller details about the character of Miranda (such as the mention that Prospero has been educating her, and her insistence on assisting Ferdinand with the hard physical labor of chopping and carrying firewood) to imply that Miranda was an intellectually and physically strong young woman, more than capable of looking after herself and making her own independent decisions: much like Anne-Marie herself, who holds her own amongst a selection of dangerous convicted criminals throughout the novel.

The class is especially interested in the potential future outcomes for the character of Caliban because it is this character with whom they most readily identify. Caliban, unlike the other characters in the play, is born into a situation of poverty that is only worsened by the exploitation of the wealthy men who invade his island and take away his freedom. He is kept in a form of prison by Prospero throughout and has very few opportunities to improve his lot in life. For this reason, the men in prison identify with his character, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds who see in the story of Caliban similarities with the treatment of slaves brought to North America from Africa, as well as the mistreatment of native peoples by colonizers from Europe.



In *The Tempest*, Prospero keeps his promise to set Ariel free at the end of the play. Likewise, Felix keeps his promise to set free both of the characters who correspond with Ariel in the novel: 8Handz and Miranda. Felix frees 8Handz in a very literal way by helping him get early parole from the prison and then taking him on the cruise. He frees Miranda in the more spiritual sense of no longer holding on to his vision of her and allowing her spirit to leave him and finally rest in peace.

## Discussion Question 1

What motivates the group to come to their conclusions about Antonio? What changes their minds?

## Discussion Question 2

What role does Estelle play in the novel?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways does the ending for Felix's character mirror the ending for Prospero's character? In what ways does it differ?

## Vocabulary

molested, spontaneous, modified, holographic, elementals, swaggers, fedora, villainous, tribute, evasion, indulgent, clambering, sorcerer, ingenious, pirouettes, virtuoso, deposited, instructive, retrospective, innovative

# Characters

## Felix

Felix is the central character / protagonist. After losing his job as Artistic Director at a small town theatre festival, Felix moves to an isolated farmhouse and plots revenge against Tony, the man who stole his job, while teaching Shakespeare in a prison.

Felix is the equivalent of the character of Prospero in *The Tempest*. Both men were ousted from a position of authority by someone who betrayed them and subsequently lived lives of isolation whilst plotting their revenge. Both men command a group of entities to carry out their plans: in Prospero's case it is a group of spirits and goblins on the enchanted island, whereas in Felix's case it is the cast members of the Fletcher Correctional Players. Notable differences between Felix and Prospero include the fact that Prospero's Miranda is alive and Felix's Miranda died at the age of three; Prospero uses magic to carry out his plans, whereas Felix relies on the art of theatre and a few hallucinogenic drugs for good measure; and Felix has a love interest in the form of Estelle, where Prospero has none.

From Felix's perspective he has two major goals in the novel: to get his revenge against Tony and to finally stage the production of *The Tempest* he had been working on when he lost his job. However, from the reader's perspective, the more pressing concern for Felix is his need to recover from his bereavement after the death of his three year old daughter Miranda. Like his bitterness towards Tony, Felix fosters his bereavement during his years of isolation. He obsessively follows Tony's career on the internet and indulges in a delusion that his daughter is still alive and aging, by speaking to her and engaging in activities such as teaching her to play chess. Felix's focus throughout the novel is always on the production of *The Tempest* and the enactment of his revenge against Tony. However, as part of this process, Felix also gains the closure he needs with his bereavement over Miranda by releasing her spirit at the end of the play, just as Prospero releases Ariel's spirit at the end of *The Tempest*.

## Tony

Tony is the chief villain and Felix's antagonist in the novel. After orchestrating Felix being fired from the role of Artistic Director, and positioning himself as his replacement, Tony builds a career in politics that – unbeknownst to him – Felix is constantly tracking from afar. Tony does not appear for long stretches of the novel, only playing a major role in the chapter in which Felix loses his job, and the chapters during the immersive production of *The Tempest* staged at Fletcher Correctional.

Tony is the equivalent of Antonio in *The Tempest*. In many ways, Tony's betrayal of Felix is less shocking than Antonio's betrayal of Prospero because Antonio and Prospero are brothers, whereas Tony and Felix are only colleagues. Further to this, the author



stresses the extent to which Felix had become detached from the practical aspects of his job, instead obsessing over increasingly gaudy and expensive directorial decisions, perhaps suggesting that Tony was a fitting replacement. However, in other more stark ways, Tony's behavior is even more villainous than Antonio's.

Both Tony and Antonio hatch plots to murder their political rivals. In Shakespeare's day, this kind of political machination and violence was much more common than it is (thankfully) in contemporary Canada. This makes Tony's suggestion that he and Seburt should murder Sal and Lonnie more shocking than Antonio's identical plan, although it also somewhat undercuts the plausibility of his character. Antonio's arc from plotting to replace his brother as Duke of Milan, to suggesting a plot to murder the King of Naples seems more believable than the leap from plotting with the board of a small town theatre festival to replace the artistic director to suggesting murdering two colleagues in cold blood and blaming it on a prison riot. Tony, notably, receives no comeuppance as a result of his murder plot, leaving the narrative open-ended as to whether Felix is safe from further attempts at revenge.

## Anne-Marie

Anne-Marie is a surrogate daughter figure for Felix in the absence of his real daughter Miranda. Anne-Marie is an actress hired by Felix to play the part of Miranda in both his original production at the theatre festival and the production staged by the Fletcher Correctional Players.

Anne-Marie is the equivalent of Miranda in *The Tempest*. One of Prospero's main goals in *The Tempest* is to successfully marry Miranda to the King's son Ferdinand, making him preoccupied with her love life throughout the play. Likewise, Felix shows an interest in Anne-Marie's love life, warning her away from forming a romantic attachment to the prisoner playing Ferdinand in their production, but encouraging her burgeoning relationship with Freddie when they meet during the immersive element of the play.

Anne-Marie presents a feminist interpretation of the character of Miranda to the class at the end of term and this feminist interpretation is reflected in the author's characterization of Anne-Marie. Rather than a delicate and innocent ingénue who Felix must protect from the dangerous criminals, Anne-Marie is depicted as a physically and mentally tough young woman more than capable of taking care of herself and holding her own in an intimidating environment. Anne-Marie argues that this is how Miranda in *The Tempest* would also have been, due to the hard physical exercise and magical training she experienced during her years growing up on the island.

## 8Handz

8Handz plays the role of Felix's sidekick and assistant at Fletcher Correctional. A prisoner convicted of cybercrimes, 8Handz assists Felix in constructing the surveillance and audio systems in their rehearsal space that allows Felix to conduct his elaborate revenge against Tony and Sal.



8Handz is one of the equivalents of the character of Ariel in *The Tempest*. In *The Tempest*, Prospero freed Ariel from being painfully imprisoned inside a tree and Ariel has been Prospero's servant ever since, grateful for partial freedom but still restrained by Prospero's commands. Likewise, 8Handz is confined to a cell in the prison until Felix begins his productions at which point he gains more freedom, but only on the understanding that he continues to follow Felix's instructions. In exchange for assisting his plot to gain vengeance against his brother, Prospero promises to free Ariel after the plan has worked. Similarly, Felix uses the bait of early parole to encourage 8Handz to help him in his plot against Tony. Both protagonists are true to their word, and Ariel and 8Handz are freed at the end of each narrative.

## Miranda

Miranda is Felix's daughter. She does not feature in the novel as a real person, only as a ghostly presence imagined by Felix in an attempt to comfort himself over her death when she was three years old. Felix imagines that Miranda insists on understudying for the part of Ariel and attending rehearsals with him. The question of whether she is real or just a figment of Felix's imagination is raised during rehearsals when 8Handz claims he can hear unexplained voices on some of their recordings.

Miranda is one of the equivalents of the character of Ariel in *The Tempest*. Ariel and Miranda serve as the moral compass for Prospero and Felix when their plots for revenge go too far, warning them that they would feel sorry for the men involved if they were human. Prospero frees Ariel at the end of *The Tempest*, and Felix finally lets go of his attachment to his dead daughter's spirit and releases her to the elements after his own production of *The Tempest* draws to a close.

## Estelle

Estelle is the love interest in the novel. She is the politician who hires Felix for the job at Fletcher Correctional, assists him with any special requests he has for the Fletcher Correctional Players, and invites him to join her on a cruise at the end of the novel in which Felix will give lectures about the success of the theatre program.

Estelle does not have a straightforward equivalent in *The Tempest* as there is no love interest included for Prospero in the play. Her closest equivalent is the 'auspicious star' in *The Tempest* that Prospero credits with giving him the opportunity to take his revenge against the men who betrayed him. Estelle fulfills this role in the novel by convincing a group of politicians to view one of Felix's productions before cutting funding to the program, without realizing that Felix has a vendetta against the individuals involved.

## Freddie

Freddie is the son of Sal O'Nally, one of the board members who assisted Tony in replacing Felix as artistic director. Freddie is committed to pursuing a career in theatre



despite his father's wishes and gets the chance to do so when Felix gives him a job at the theatre festival at the end of the novel.

Freddie is the equivalent of the character of Ferdinand in *The Tempest*. Both men are separated from their fathers during incidents in which they fear for their lives, although Freddie is quickly disabused of the idea that there is anything to fear from his predicament. Both men fall instantly in love with the only woman they encounter during these incidents: Anne-Marie and Miranda respectively.

## Sal O'Nally

Sal O'Nally is a politician who assists Tony in his plot against Felix. He is the equivalent of Alonso, the King of Naples, in *The Tempest*. Both men fear that their son has been killed during the dramatic incidents staged by Prospero and Felix – the tempest and the prison riot respectively – and are therefore more willing to go along with the demands made of them when they realize that Freddie and Ferdinand are alive after all.

## Sebert

Sebert is the equivalent of Sebastian in *The Tempest*, both of which are minor roles. The main purpose of both characters is to provide an opportunity for Tony and Antonio to suggest committing murder, thus proving that they really are as evil as Felix and Prospero believe them to be. Sebert listens to Tony's plan to murder Sal and Lonnie so that Sebert can replace Sal as the leader of their political party. Sebastian, the King's brother, listens to Antonio's suggestion that they kill the King so that Sebastian can ascend to the throne.

## Lonnie Gordon

Lonnie Gordon is a member of the board on the theatre festival who unsuccessfully tried to defend Felix from being replaced by Tony. He is the equivalent of the character of Gonzalo in *The Tempest*. While Gonzalo smuggled Prospero's magic books to him before he and Miranda were sent to sea, Lonnie brings Felix his costume and props from his production of *The Tempest*, knowing how much they mean to him. Both characters are unfailingly optimistic and spend great energy trying to convince their respective superiors that everything is fine and their sons are probably not dead.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## Prospero's Staff and Robe

Felix's staff and robe, which he intended to wear as a costume to play Prospero in his original production of *The Tempest*, is symbolic of his obsession with revenge. The costume is the last thing given to him before he is escorted away from the theatre by security and is the only vestige of his former life that he keeps in his new home when he begins his job at the prison. From time to time, Felix stares at the staff and robe in his closet, pondering whether the correct moment to wear them again has arrived, but always deciding that the time is not right. He only dons the outfit once he is sure in his plan and feels ready to play Prospero once more while enacting his revenge against Tony.

## Isolated Farmhouse

The isolated farmhouse, which Felix rents from a local family after losing his job, is symbolic of the enchanted island on which Prospero and Miranda live during the course of *The Tempest*. Although the farmhouse is not magic in the same way as the island, it is nevertheless associated with supernatural occurrences, most notably Felix's delusion that he can see and hear Miranda inside the house and playing and singing around the farmland outside. Further to this, at the end of the novel when Felix discovers that the family has unexpectedly abandoned the farm, he muses that they disappeared almost as if they were only ever spirits who had been sent there to serve a purpose for him but had left now that that purpose has been fulfilled.

## Chess

Chess is symbolic of the extent of Felix's delusion about the ghost of Miranda. Rather than just speaking to her or hearing her voice in the distance, Felix has gone so far as to set-up a chess board on which he convinces himself first that he has taught Miranda how to play, and second that they now regularly play each other when Felix is at home on his own. This is a detail taken from the original in which Miranda and Ferdinand play chess together, indicating that Felix's interpretations of the play are beginning to influence his delusions about his dead daughter.

## Choreography Video

The Youtube video that Felix shows to the prisoners of Anne-Marie performing her own choreographed routine with a troupe of male dancers is symbolic of her physical strength and her ability to hold her own in an intimidating environment. Fearing that the men may be likely to harass or otherwise intimidate Anne-Marie when she joins them for rehearsals, Felix shows them the Youtube video of her dancing in order to not-so-subtly

inform them that she is not someone they should mess with. The Youtube video foreshadows Anne-Marie's later acrobatic display which she gives while delivering her class report about the character of Miranda.

## **Cigarettes**

Cigarettes symbolize the bond between Felix and the Fletcher Correctional Players whilst also symbolizing the power dynamic between them. Felix goes to personal risk in order to smuggle the cigarettes in to the prison to reward the cast for their hard work at the end of the production, showing that he cares about them and wishes to treat them with kindness. However, they also represent payment and bribery on behalf of Felix as he threatens to deduct points from the students' final grade (which would result in fewer cigarettes at the end of the production) if they do not follow his rules. The obedience of the students is partially based on their regard for Felix but partially based on their desire to stay in his good books and receive rewards, mirroring Ariel's relationship with Prospero in *The Tempest*.

## **Disney Princess Dolls**

The Disney Princess dolls bought as props for the production of *The Tempest* symbolize different things for different characters, grief for Felix and feminist interpretation of the play for Ann-Marie. For Felix, the dolls are a symbol of his unresolved grief because they remind him of his dead daughter Miranda who never grew to be old enough for him to give her such things. Felix's trip to the toy store reminds the reader that Felix's grief is as much of a motivating force in the novel as his desire for revenge. For Anne-Marie, the dolls are used as symbols of the feminist interpretation of *The Tempest* she presents to the rest of the cast. She uses them in her class report in which she imagines a future where Miranda saves the male characters from Antonio, assisted by the three goddesses in *The Tempest* who were played by the dolls in their production.

## **Audio Recording Feedback**

The audio recording feedback that 8Handz detects during rehearsals and then again during the phony prison riot / immersive theatrical experience is symbolic of the possibility that Felix may not be as crazy as he seems. Throughout the novel it has seemed to the reader, and indeed to Felix himself, that his visions of Miranda are nothing but a delusion brought on by his grief. After Miranda declares to Felix that she intends to understudy for Ariel and 8Handz begins hearing feedback over Ariel's lines in the recording, however, the question is raised whether Miranda might be a supernatural being that can be detected by people other than Felix.



## Knitting Needles

Anne-Marie's knitting needles are symbolic of her combined femininity and physical prowess. Felix is surprised by the knitting needles as he thinks of knitting as stereotypically feminine and of Anne-Marie as not stereotypically feminine. As the security guards point out when Anne-Marie tries to take the knitting needles into the prison with her: they are sharp and could be used as a weapon, despite being associated with a stereotypically feminine activity. This is a metaphor for Anne-Marie's character as a whole. Although she is an actress playing the part of a supposedly weak and innocent girl in the play, Anne-Marie herself has sharp edges that imply physical strength and the ability to cause harm if the need arises, just like the knitting needles.

## Grapes

Grapes are symbolic of power through alternative means - whether magically induced power or drug induced power. In *The Tempest*, Prospero uses magic to enchant Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian in order to frighten them and make them regret their mistreatment of him. However, the novel is more realistic and does not use magic for this part of the story, instead substituting Prospero's spells for grapes that Felix has laced with hallucinogenic drugs. This is one of the weaker story points in the novel, as it seems unlikely that three men who believe that they are being held captive in a prison riot would stop for a snack. Nevertheless, the grapes are Felix's very own version of a magic spell.

## Cruise

For Felix, the cruise symbolizes a bold new future and a break away from the past. No longer held back by his bitterness over losing his job or his grief over the death of Miranda, Felix's final voyage is symbolic of a fresh start and a new chapter in his life.

At the end of the novel, Felix is planning to take a cruise along with Estelle and 8Handz, during which he will give lectures about the success of the Fletcher Correctional Players. This is symbolic of the final voyage planned by the characters in *The Tempest* to return to Italy on a ship. For Prospero, this final voyage is a return to his home after a long absence.



# Settings

## Theatre

The theatre at which Felix is the Artistic Director is the equivalent of Milan in *The Tempest*. Both locations are the place where Felix and Prospero were in positions of authority before being ousted by the evil plots of Tony and Antonio. Felix had become detached from the practicalities of his role at the theatre before he was fired and when he returns to the theatre at the end of the novel he has a much more level-headed attitude, leaving the creative side to the younger Freddie and Anne-Marie, while taking on the responsibilities of the job himself. Prospero does not return to Milan during *The Tempest*.

## Fletcher Correctional

Fletcher Correctional is the location where Felix licks his wounds over what happened at the theatre festival as well as where he eventually conducts his revenge against Tony. It is one of the equivalents of the enchanted island in *The Tempest*. Fletcher Correctional is a place where Felix gets back to basics with his artistic approach, in contrast to his excessive and bizarre productions at the theatre festival. He returns from his time at the prison a more humble and gracious person.

## Felix's Farmhouse

The isolated farmhouse where Felix moves after losing his job as artistic director is one of the equivalents of the enchanted island from *The Tempest*. The farmhouse symbolizes the isolation that Prospero feels being cut off from all of society whilst on the island, although for Felix he still has access to towns and people in a way that is not possible for Prospero. The farmhouse also features some of the magical and supernatural elements associated with Prospero's island: it is this location where Felix most often indulges in his delusion that Miranda is still alive and communicating with him and, when he eventually leaves the house he notices that the family he rented it from have disappeared musing that "It was as if they'd never been there at all; as if they'd manifested themselves only as long as Felix had needed them, then turned to mist and blended into the fields and woodlots" (279).

## Toy Store

Felix visits a toy store in a nearby town in order to purchase three Disney Princess dolls that Anne-Marie has requested to use as the goddesses during their production of *The Tempest*. The toy store demonstrates the extent to which Felix still suffers from extremely raw emotions in relation to his daughter Miranda's death: he finds the experience of purchasing toys for young children very painful.

## Restaurant

The restaurant where Felix meets with Estelle to stay up-to-date about the impending visit from Tony and Sal offers an optimistic glimpse into the life Felix could have when he finally gives up his obsession with revenge and his delusion about Miranda's ghost. Estelle and Felix are attracted to each other, as shown through the very date-like meeting places they agree on and Estelle's eventual invitation to Felix to join her on a cruise. If Felix pursues the elements of his life on display at the restaurant he will find happiness not available to him by merely threatening Tony and Sal at the prison.



# Themes and Motifs

## Revenge

Revenge, the central theme of the novel, is presented as a precarious and incomplete way of dealing with others. The central revenge plot of the narrative is Felix's desire for vengeance against Tony. The extent to which Felix's revenge against Tony can be considered successful depends on which revenge plot from *The Tempest* is the closest equivalent to the revenge plot in the novel.

On the surface, the clearest comparison between Felix's revenge plot against Tony in *Hag-Seed* is Prospero's revenge plot against his brother Antonio in *The Tempest*. Prospero is removed from a position of authority as the Duke of Milan by Antonio who seeks to replace him in that role, just as Felix is replaced as Artistic Director of the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival by his deputy Tony. Both Prospero and Felix then undergo a period of several years of isolation (Prospero on the enchanted island, Felix in the rural farmhouse) festering in their desire for revenge. When opportunity strikes in the form of King Alonso's voyage to attend his daughter's wedding in *The Tempest*, and Tony's visit to Fletcher Correctional in *Hag-Seed*, both Prospero and Felix use the occasion to exact revenge and regain their previous stature and position in life.

However, although there is only one major revenge plot in *Hag-Seed*, there are two separate major revenge plots in *The Tempest*. Alongside Prospero's attempts to gain vengeance against Antonio is Caliban's own attempts to get revenge against Prospero himself. Caliban functions as a kind of dark mirror of Prospero, behaving in very similar ways to the protagonist and underscoring the extent to which Prospero perhaps does not deserve the audience's sympathy. From Caliban's perspective, Prospero usurped his position as rightful ruler of the island just as Antonio usurped Prospero's rightful position as Duke of Milan. Caliban's revenge plot involves convincing the drunken Stephano and Trinculo to help him murder Prospero, while Prospero is engaged in his own revenge against Antonio.

Unlike Prospero's plans, Caliban ultimately fails in his attempts to regain the control that he lost to Prospero when he first arrived on the island. This raises questions about how best to interpret Felix's revenge plot in the novel. The novel, after all, is named after Caliban (whom Prospero refers to as a hag-seed) not after Prospero himself. At the end of the novel, Felix has undoubtedly succeeded in reclaiming his old job and frightening Tony, but has he really regained any power over him? Despite openly plotting murder during the phony prison riot, Tony does not suffer any real consequences for his actions in the novel. Felix gets his job back, but it is a position Tony no longer wants or needs. Likewise, in *The Tempest*, the success of Prospero's revenge plot implies that Caliban will be gifted free reign of the island once more, but only due to Prospero's own rise in status to Duke of Milan. The class reports in Part V also imply that Tony, like Antonio, may not yet be finished with his own thoughts of revenge implying that Felix, like Caliban, ends the story in just as weak and vulnerable a position as he began.



## Theatre and Self-Knowledge

Theatre is presented in the novel as a powerful tool in the path towards self-knowledge, in which all of the characters who become immersed in the world of the play learn something new about themselves and about each other as a result of the process.

This is especially true for the convict cast of the Fletcher Correctional Players who experience their study of Shakespeare as an exploration of their own lives, histories, and backgrounds as well as an artistic performance of a classic work of theatre. The narration reveals that this has been the case for the students during the earlier productions, as well as the production of *The Tempest* with which the narrative is mainly concerned. In regards to plays from earlier years, students reflected on the characters in ways that revealed their own feelings about their lives, relationships, and the crimes that brought them into prison in the first place: “Was Macbeth a psycho, or what? Was Lady Macbeth always bonkers, or did she go that way out of guilt? Was Richard III a stone-cold killer by nature, or was he a product of his times and his totally depraved extended family, where you had to kill or be killed?” (56).

The study of *The Tempest* in particular raises questions of political consciousness for the men and awareness of the way people from certain backgrounds are given less of a chance in life because of the color of their skin or the economic prosperity of their families. These questions are explored through the character of Caliban who reveals to the men that unfair social systems are as much of a contributing factor to criminal behavior as is individual error: “Why should the other ones in this play get a second chance at life, but not him? 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. Five strikes against him from Day One. He never asked to get born.” (265).

Felix also deepens his sense of self-knowledge through the character of Prospero who shares many of Felix’s own character traits. When Felix lists the contradictory traits apparent in the character of Prospero he is also describing himself: “Entitled aristocrat, modest hermit? Wide old mage, revengeful old poop? Irritable and unreasonable, kindly and caring? Sadistic, forgiving? Too suspicious, too trusting?” (179). When Felix starts to worry about his own sanity, he soothes his fears by reassuring himself about Prospero’s sanity instead: “No, Felix, it isn’t, he tells himself firmly. Prospero is not crazy. Ariel exists. People other than Prospero see him and hear him. The enchantments are real. Hold on to that. Trust the play” (144).

## Feminism

Feminism is a minor theme in a novel with a predominantly male cast of characters, but it nevertheless shows that women are capable of holding their own in intimidating and potentially violent male-dominated environments. The theme of feminism is explored through the characters of Anne-Marie, Felix’s daughter Miranda, and the casting of the feminine roles in the production of *The Tempest*.





The question of feminism and its opposite – sexism – is first raised by Felix when he ponders how to get around the fact that none of the students at Fletcher Correctional will be willing to play the part of Miranda after he decides to stage *The Tempest* for this year's play. This is significant because it has already been revealed to the reader that the Fletcher Correctional Players have successfully staged *Macbeth* as a previous production, a play in which one of the main characters, Lady Macbeth, is a woman. The differences between the characters of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and Miranda in *The Tempest* reveal the attitudes of the students towards what is acceptable behavior for men and what is acceptable behavior for women. One of the cast was happy to play Lady Macbeth in an earlier production specifically because the character is not stereotypically feminine: Lady Macbeth is violent, ambitious, and vengeful. Miranda, on the other hand, can be interpreted as a more stereotypically feminine character: passive, happy to obey the orders of her father, and mainly interested in falling in love with the first eligible man she casts her eyes on. It is for this reason that Felix decides to introduce the novel's main female character, Anne-Marie, to play the role of Miranda.

Although Anne-Marie has been cast precisely because of stereotypically sexist notions about how men and women should behave, she immediately undercuts these attitudes with her own personality. Rather than being passive, shy, or obsessed with romantic relationships, Anne-Marie reveals herself to be physically intimidating, capable of manipulating others for the sake of the production, and not at all intimidated by the criminals in the cast. Anne-Marie is contrasted with Felix's vision of his dead daughter Miranda, who plays a stereotypically feminine role by obeying her father's wishes and devotedly staying by his side rather than pursuing her own freedom. Felix's gradual realization that he is stifling his daughter's spirit (which may really be present according to 8Handz's interpretation of the audio feedback) causes him to let go of his limiting ideas about her at the end of the novel and set her free.

## Grief

The novel shows how unresolved bereavement can be a quieter but even more damaging psychological state than an obsession with revenge. For Felix, once he moves to the isolated farmhouse, he is only consciously aware of two strong needs in his life: to somehow manage to stage his own version of *The Tempest* and to find a way to get his revenge against Tony. However, from the reader's perspective, the more important goal that Felix needs to achieve in order to feel happy in his life again is to somehow resolve his grief over the death of his three-year-old daughter Miranda.

Although the revenge plot is foregrounded throughout the novel, Felix's struggles with bereavement predate his troubles with Tony and outlast his successful attempt at revenge against the men who did him wrong. Arguably, Felix's unresolved grief contributed as much to the loss of his job as Artistic Director of the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival as did the machinations of his nemesis Tony. From Felix's perspective, while he stewes in his bitterness and desire for revenge, the loss of his job came about purely through his betrayal by Tony. But looking more closely, it becomes apparent that Felix's grief had a severe impact on his ability to do his job properly, allowing Tony to take





advantage of him: “The Tempest would be brilliant: the best thing he’d ever done. He had been – he realizes now – unhealthily obsessed with it. It was like the Taj Mahal, an ornate mausoleum raised in honor of a beloved shade, or a priceless jeweled casket containing ashes. But more than that, because inside the charmed bubble he was creating, his Miranda would live again” (17).

After Miranda’s death, Felix insisted on producing *The Tempest* and playing the part of Prospero, the father of Miranda: “Felix himself would be Prospero, her loving father. Protective – perhaps too protective, but only because he was acting in his daughter’s best interests. And wise; wiser than Felix” (16). This suggests that Felix was trying to resurrect his daughter in the play rather than confronting the fact of her death in reality. Felix’s addiction to the imaginary continuation of Miranda’s life carries on even after he has lost his job when he speaks out loud to her spirit while living alone and imagines her running around outside on the farm.

Felix’s recovery from his unresolved grief is shown through his gradual willingness to let go of Miranda’s spirit and his corresponding willingness to form a closer relationship with Estelle. Early in the novel, Felix irrationally claims that he cannot enter into a romantic relationship with Estelle because “he has a dependent child and those duties come first” (67). His recovery from this attitude is symbolized by his decision to go on the cruise with Estelle at the end of the novel.

## Crime and Punishment

The theme of crime and punishment is explored through a spectrum of wrongdoing in which no one is entirely guilty of a specific crime but, equally, none of the characters are entirely innocent.

For a novel set mainly in a prison it is perhaps surprising that the central act of wrongdoing in the novel is a moral action rather than a criminal action. The main “crime” committed in the text is Tony’s plot to usurp Felix as Artistic Director of the Makeshiweg Theatre Festival. Although Felix certainly holds Tony responsible for what happens, Tony is not the only guilty party in this equation because Felix’s own lack of care and dedication towards the practical and financial aspects of his job contributed to Tony’s ability to usurp him. This argument is underscored by the students who studied Tony’s equivalent character in *The Tempest*: Antonio. The students argue that Prospero was partially responsible for what happened between him and Antonio, unknowingly making the same argument about Felix and Tony in the course of their report: “But on Antonio’s side, you need to add that it’s partly Prospero’s fault because he wasn’t interested in anything but his magic. It was like leaving your car unlocked: he made crime easy for Antonio. So what can you expect, Prospero was stupid, he had it coming” (251).

As a result of Tony’s “crime” against Felix he is punished in the form of the immersive theatrical experience / phony prison riot. However, unlike Sal who is convinced that his son Freddie is dead, Tony does not suffer a large amount during this sequence. Further to this, Tony plots to murder Lonnie and Sebert during the riot and receives no



punishment as a result of his actions. This is in direct contrast to the men in the Fletcher Correctional Players, who have all been imprisoned as a result of their crimes (despite some of them protesting their innocence to Felix). This reflects the social standing of the different characters involved: rich and powerful men like Tony are able to escape punishment for their crimes, whereas the poor and marginalized cast members are imprisoned as punishment for their crimes. This is reflective of the gap in status between wealthy and powerful characters such as Prospero and Antonio in *The Tempest* in contrast to the status of the lowly Caliban. Nothing Caliban plots in *The Tempest* is any worse than what Antonio or Prospero attempt, but only Caliban is forced to face the consequences of his actions, while the rich men are free to continue with their normal lives.



# Styles

## Point of View

The narrative is told almost exclusively from the perspective of Felix, except for a few key moments throughout the text. This has the effect of making the reader empathize with Felix's character, even when he is doing questionable things such as spiking grapes with hallucinogenic drugs. It also has the effect of making the reader question Felix's sanity. From Felix's perspective, he is in control of his delusion about the presence of his daughter Miranda, understanding that it is just a creation of his mind and not something that is really occurring. Throughout the novel, Felix chastises himself that it is time for him to move on and give up on the delusion. This convinces the reader that Miranda is, indeed, an illusion. The extent to which Felix is in control of his imagination is questioned throughout the text such as the moment when Felix accidentally speaks aloud during one of the classes when he intended his words to be a silent thought. The question of Felix's sanity comes to the forefront of the story when Miranda decides to accompany him to rehearsals and understudy for the part of Ariel. Although Felix has given the impression throughout the novel that Miranda is a figment of his imagination and he knows it, 8Handz is able to detect traces of her voice on the audio recordings of scenes where Ariel has lines.

Felix's sanity is further questioned in one of the rare moments not told from his perspective, when Anne-Marie tries to convince Freddie to play along with their production of *The Tempest*, telling him: "There's someone here who's crazy. Crazy as a full-moon dog. Thinks he's Prospero. No, I mean really. He's re-enacting *The Tempest*, and you're Ferdinand" (215). Because the rest of the narrative gives no insight into Anne-Marie's perspective, it is left to the reader to decide whether this is her real opinion of Felix or merely her attempt to coerce Freddie. The other key example of sections told from other points of view is when the group of politicians arrives at the prison for the performance. This is used to add dramatic irony to the plot, as the reader knows what mayhem awaits them inside long before Tony and the others find out what's going on.

## Language and Meaning

The novel incorporates poetic and historical language from the original play and adds contemporary twists and pragmatic reversals for comic effect. The narration while Felix is lost in thought in particular is prone to flights of theatrical fancy and whimsy that reflect the character's detachment from reality, sometimes bringing him back to earth with comically prosaic reversals. On the topic of the farming family mysteriously disappearing at the end of the novel the narration observes: "It was as if they'd never been there at all; as if they'd manifested themselves only as long as Felix had needed them, then turned to mist and blended into the fields and woodlots. Ye elves of hills,



brooks, standing lakes, and groves, he murmurs to himself. But most likely they're in Burt's truck, heading west to better pickings" (279).

The most notable combination of Shakespearean and contemporary language occurs as a result of Felix's instruction that there can be no profanity uttered during the class that does not use curse words found in the text of *The Tempest*, leading to such outbursts as "scurvy awesome" (98), "Way to red plague go" (98), "Look on the map pox brain" (148), and "I don't whoreson think so" (148). Felix's motivation for this task is the belief that asking them to identify curse words in the text will give them greater understanding of the meaning of all of the words in the play during the process, without the students realizing that they are learning: "Your profanity, thinks Felix, has oft been your whoreson hag-born progenitor of literacy" (89).

## Structure

For the most part, the novel is told in the third person, present tense, in chronological order with a few key exceptions. The main structural device in the novel is the repetition of the text in the Prologue which is used again word-for-word as Chapter 34, in which the screening of *The Tempest* begins but is interrupted by an apparent prison riot. The first time this section of text is included, during the Prologue, the reader has no knowledge of what is going on or who is involved. By the time the narrative returns to this point in the story, however, the words have taken on a very different meaning.

The biggest difference between the first inclusion of this section and the second inclusion is the reduction in the implied level of danger. In the Prologue, there is every reason for the reader to assume that something frightening and violent is occurring whereas when the text is repeated, although no changes have been made to the words, the reader is now aware that the whole section is nothing but a harmless illusion. This mirrors the opening scene of *The Tempest* itself which is designed to convince the audience that the characters onstage are in danger of serious harm as a result of the storm. Shortly afterwards, however, Prospero reveals to Miranda that the tempest is an illusion created by Ariel and that no one on board will come to any harm.

Part I of the novel corresponds with the backstory communicated between Prospero and Miranda in Act 1 of *The Tempest* and most of Part IV corresponds with other elements of *The Tempest*. The rest of the narrative, dealing with preparations for the production and its aftermath, bears less resemblance to the plot of the original.



## Quotes

Finding the money had been Tony's thing. A lesser thing: the money was only a means to an end, the end being transcendence: that had been understood by both of them. Felix the cloud-riding enchanter, Tony the earth-based factotum and gold-grubber.  
-- Narration (chapter 2)

**Importance:** This quote is a reflection on the dynamic between Felix and Tony that allowed Tony to usurp Felix from his job. This quotation suggests that although Tony behaved in an underhanded way, Felix was at least partially responsible for his own fate because he became arrogant about his creative abilities, looking down on the important practical aspects of his work and ceding them to Tony.

He does sometimes wonder how the crafts he's teaching might come in handy in, for instance, a bank robbery or a kidnapping, but he backgrounds such unworthy thoughts when they appear.  
-- Narration (chapter 13)

**Importance:** Felix reflects on the fact that the skills he teaches to the prisoners could be interpreted as ways that might assist in criminal acts rather than theatrical careers. This concern is never directly addressed but resurfaces later in the novel when the cast discusses the potential future for the character of Caliban and Felix wonders whether he has created something that he cannot control.

No, Felix, it isn't, he tells himself firmly. Prospero is not crazy. Ariel exists. People other than Prospero see him and hear him. The enchantments are real. Hold on to that. Trust the play."  
-- Narration / Felix (chapter 23)

**Importance:** As Felix's mental health deteriorates throughout the production, he begins to question his own sanity through the medium of questioning Prospero's sanity in *The Tempest*. Felix convinces himself here that the character of Prospero is not crazy because other people are aware of the things that Ariel says and does. Likewise, when Miranda eventually accompanies Felix to rehearsals it transpires that 8Handz is able to hear her voice as well, undercutting the earlier implication that Felix's communication with her was purely delusional.

Why did he ever think he could play this impossible part? So many contradictions to Prospero! Entitled aristocrat, modest hermit? Wide old mage, revengeful old poop? Irritable and unreasonable, kindly and caring? Sadistic, forgiving? Too suspicious, too trusting?  
-- Narration / Felix (chapter 29)

**Importance:** While berating himself for the arrogance of thinking he could play the part of Prospero, Felix unconsciously describes his own personality whilst describing the traits associated with Prospero. Felix behaves like a theatrical aristocrat at the prison



but lives a simple isolated existence at home. He offers sound advice to his students but also forms an insane revenge plot against his old foes. He is suspicious of Tony but never of the convicted criminals who surround him every day.

The other demonstration cell, the nineties one, will be the nap-time location for Alonso and Gonzalo – sorry, for O’Nally and Lonnie Gordon.

-- Felix (chapter 32)

**Importance:** While giving directions to the cast about how they will stage their immersive theatrical experience and phony prison riot, Felix’s slip of the tongue when naming the people involved (using the names for characters from *The Tempest* rather than the names of the visiting politicians) shows that the line between fiction and reality is beginning to blur for Felix.

There’s someone here who’s crazy. Crazy as a full-moon dog. Thinks he’s Prospero. No, I mean really. He’s re-enacting *The Tempest*, and you’re Ferdinand.

-- Anne-Marie (chapter 35)

**Importance:** Anne-Marie says this to Freddie while attempting to convince him to participate in the charade of continuing to perform *The Tempest* during the phony prison riot, but her meaning is ambiguous. The story is told mainly from the perspective of Felix and this is one of the rare occasions where the reader is presented with information from the perspective of another character. It is unclear whether Anne-Marie says this merely to convince Freddie to go along with the plan, or whether it is a sincere representation of her opinion of Felix and his bizarre revenge plot.

If I were redesigning the prison system,” Lonnie continues, “I’d try giving the inmates more freedom, not less. They could vote on things, they could make their own decisions. Design their own menus, for instance; that could be a useful skill they could develop.

-- Lonnie Gordon (chapter 36)

**Importance:** During the fake prison riot, Lonnie muses on potential humanitarian reform of the prison system, mirroring the behavior of Gonzalo in *The Tempest*, who uses the opportunity of being shipwrecked on an island in the middle of nowhere to mull over the possibility of creating a new utopian society. Both men demonstrate consistent optimism and concern for the welfare of others despite the difficult situations they each find themselves in.

But now she whispers, I would, sir, were I human.

-- Narration / Miranda (chapter 38)

**Importance:** Miranda uses one of Ariel’s lines from *The Tempest* to convince Felix that his plot has gone too far and that he should show some mercy towards the men that he is deliberately distressing and disorientating with the immersive production. The line serves the dual purpose of urging Felix to be more compassionate and underscoring the fact that Miranda is a spirit and not really his human daughter as he likes to pretend.



But on Antonio's side, you need to add that it's partly Prospero's fault because he wasn't interested in anything but his magic. It was like leaving your car unlocked: he made crime easy for Antonio. So what can you expect, Prospero was stupid, he had it coming -- SnakeEye (chapter 42)

**Importance:** In the class report for the character of Antonio, one of the convicts SnakeEye explains why he believes that Prospero was partly to blame for what happened between him and his brother Antonio. This serves as analysis of *The Tempest* on the one hand and an accidental criticism of Felix on the other hand. SnakeEye has no idea about what happened between Felix and Tony but his criticisms of Prospero apply equally to Felix.

There. That's our report. Antonio acts like what you'd expect him to do, and Prospero doesn't see it coming because he never saw it coming the first time.  
-- SnakeEye (chapter 42)

**Importance:** SnakeEye concludes his report about Antonio with a line that functions as a warning to Felix. SnakeEye has argued that Antonio will once again try to take revenge against Prospero after the end of the play, implying that Felix must also be on guard for Tony seeking revenge against him. However, SnakeEye predicts that Prospero (and hence Felix) will once again be too blind to see it coming.

Felix is intrigued: Caliban has escaped the play. He's escaped from Prospero, like a shadow detaching itself from its body and skulking off on its own. Now there's no one to restrain him. Will Prospero be spared, or will retribution climb in through his window one dark night and cut his weasand? Felix wonders. Gingerly he feels his neck.  
-- Narration / Felix (chapter 46)

**Importance:** Felix realizes that the things he has taught the class have provided them with skills and imagination that are now entirely beyond his control. The men, like Caliban in their version of his future, have escaped the control of their master and are now doing things of their own volition. This makes Felix uneasy, as the men are convicted criminals and he is not entirely sure how they would respond to having free reign over how to create their own narratives.

It was as if they'd never been there at all; as if they'd manifested themselves only as long as Felix needed them, then turned to mist and blended into the fields and woodlots. Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves, he murmurs to himself.  
-- Narration / Felix (Epilogue)

**Importance:** After the end of the production, Felix returns home to discover that the family he rents his house from has suddenly abandoned their farm. Felix imagines the family in terms similar to the goblins and spirits commanded by Prospero on his enchanted island: there to do his bidding but gone once again once he no longer requires their assistance.