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## Wide Thinking? What Is That?: The Critical Consciousness of Tone in Margaret Atwood's Hag-Seed

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### Cover Page Footnote

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## Wide Thinking? What Is That?

### The Critical Consciousness of Tone in Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed*

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#### **Abstract**

This paper uses Margaret Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016) as a case study in the political implications of literary affect. The hypothesis, which combines Helen Small's quest to prove the "value of the humanities" with Paolo Freire's "critical consciousness" pedagogy, is that literary tone can have progressive political weight. With Sianne Ngai's works as a blueprint, I offer readings for three tonal areas in Atwood's text: disgust, sympathy, and cuteness. I suggest that Atwood achieves real political ends by complicating the reader's emotional experience of the novel and by articulating a concrete problem: incarceration stigma. The original manuscript also evaluates *Hag-Seed*'s disruption of genre, but that work will only be summarized here. Interestingly, literary affect studies can never achieve the scientific rigor of the Enlightenment. In the introduction, I examine the limits and possibilities of humanities epistemology.

*Keywords:* Literary Affect, Critical Consciousness, Activist Humanities, Prison Abolition, Postmodernism, Epistemology, Margaret Atwood.

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#### **Introduction**

What is the role of literature in the face of real-life crises? I think that a present-day literary academic might hope to reply that literature holds an essential, progressive place in the

political world, because of its impact on people’s internal lives. Elizabeth Ammons and Modhumita Roy offer a relevant etymology for *sahitya*, the Sanskrit word for literature:

“[*sahitya* is] that which takes us along, as though on a journey[thus] *sahitya* brings the far near... the far—that which is temporally, spatially, ideologically, and experientially distant – is brought near through empathy, inspiration, identification, and even outrage and anger” (Ammons and Roy, 5).

Ammons’ and Roy’s idea underscores that literature is definitionally political because it bridges gaps in understanding. When a story that has been scarcely heard is brought into our literary consciousness, we find ourselves “taken along” – perhaps not altogether willingly – into unfamiliar minds and far-off places, and yet which through the magic of the creative arts are made to appear so like our own that we recognize them and they become familiar. Uniquely, as Ammons and Roy suggest, literature gives us “empathetic” tools to cross many kinds of distances. It does so through invoking a variety of feelings: “empathy, inspiration, identification, and even outrage and anger.” I stress that *feeling* is the arena that literature operates in.

Often, the effect of literature is comforting: The famed United States feminist critic, Elaine Showalter, has observed that, after the attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001, some American schoolteachers reported “a depth of tragic understanding they had never anticipated” within the primary texts they’d taught for many years (Showalter, 2003). In that case study, literature provided a fresh perspective during a difficult time, and the tangible result of that perspective was emotional peace. From seemingly inescapable grief, these teachers found assurance in the fact that others also “understand,” and have survived, loss. A central part of literature’s role in the non-literary world seems to be its ability to teach alternative perspectives.

Literature can also be disruptive to our internal lives by stirring up strong emotions and linking them to a real-world event. Perhaps the most familiar example of this linkage in literary studies is Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), which as Elizabeth Ammons writes was "written to produce intense reactions of fear, anger, pity, horror, shame, hope... For many readers, [including at least one Congressman, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*] made slavery immediate and opposition imperative" (Ammons, 9). Stowe imbues the national conversation on slavery with a new emotional weight. As a result, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is quite often credited with the direct political impact of repealing the Fugitive Slave Act and partially held responsible for the American Civil War. At the same time, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is read often—and justifiably—as a case study for anti-Black stereotypes. The sympathetic Black characters, Eliza and Tom, are given a strong internal life: their decisions are guided by pure moral axioms like "trust" and love (Stowe, 77-78). However, part of what makes Eliza and Tom sympathetic is their stark difference from a cast of "outrageous," or uncouth, minstrel figures such as a stablehand named Black Sam (Stowe, 88). This distinction between Black characters is both an issue of the hierarchy of work (Eliza and Tom do housework while Sam does fieldwork) and colorist (Eliza, especially, is praised for her White-proximate features, while Sam gains his nickname for being darker-skinned). This is not to say that Stowe's work is invalid for its faults. It is simply necessary to recognize the complex history of literary affect and realize that it is not just the artist but also the reader who contributes to a work's legacy.

In this dissertation, I focus on Margaret Atwood's experiments with the tonal components of literature and tie them to political realities. I study Atwood's *Hag-Seed* (2016), which is her contribution to the Hogarth Shakespeare project. The Hogarth Shakespeare's brief mission statement is to see "Shakespeare's works retold by acclaimed and bestselling novelists of today"

(Hogarth). Theirs is a modest aim: to make the Bard's original plays more palatable by translation into contemporary popular novels. Yet *Hag-Seed* is a much more ambitious project than simply putting *The Tempest* (1611) into twenty-first century clothing. Throughout, Atwood puts curious – and, I think, radical – pressures on our understandings of tone and genre. At the same time, *Hag-Seed* faces the constraint of remaining faithful to the material and plot of the original Shakespeare. The result is that Atwood, who is so often *explicitly, thematically* political – most popularly in the novel-turned-Hulu-show *The Handmaid's Tale* (1996) – must rely on subtler literary elements to make political points. I seize this opportunity in Atwood's long career to study her use of form in isolation. I show that tone, in *Hag-Seed*, generates empathy and progressive thinking regardless of thematic material.

This work frames Atwood's experimentation with form as a version of Paulo Freire's "critical consciousness." Critical consciousness is a pedagogical ethic which seeks to make people "aware of inequity and [the need] to constantly resist oppressive norms and ways of being" (Jemal, 602). The goal is to teach interrogation and deconstruction of unjust, or "oppressive," norms. As such, critical consciousness is a useful tool for such progressive critical schools as Marxism and postcolonialism, which build their arguments on structural analysis. There are two relevant steps to this pedagogy for my purposes. I first show that Atwood arrests her reader's attention through what I call "radical empathy," or empathy for imperfect characters. I then argue that the questions which radical empathy raise force us into the postmodern tradition, i.e. "problematizing and pluralizing the real" (Pérez Castillo, 291-292). The basic act of a reader questioning their previously held assumptions about the real-world, which I argue Atwood catalyzes, is the key to building critical consciousness. Yet the view of literature as a teacher, or that which makes high concepts accessible, can also hinder academic pursuits.

Affect, or emotional response, is so accessible to an everyday, non-academic person that it presents something of an epistemological problem. As Sianne Ngai reminds us, any reading of tone assumes an “implied listener” who is responding to words on the page by experiencing a tonal register (Ngai, *UF* 31). In order to analyze emotions, it is not enough to show that a structure exists in the text; the human response is even more important. For an academic piece, this requires an account of the critic’s own affective response, in their attempt to register what the implied listener is meant to feel. I fully admit that the evidence in this project is primarily my account of myself as a reader. Such data is non-falsifiable, non-quantifiable, and likely subjective; in a physics experiment, it would not stand as proof of anything. Yet the same aspects of personal experience which make it unacceptable to a STEM standard of knowledge are exactly the areas that the humanities may claim as its unique contribution to the academy. Ammons complains that literary studies is losing relevance because it “says little if anything at all to most people” (Ammons, *Brave* x). I see my project as relevant to people outside of English academia both because of its subject matter and because the metric I am using is accessible. This project, however modest, is therefore part of a broader reassertion of the public value of the humanities.

I would also be remiss to forget Atwood’s own perspective on the subjectivity of humanities academia. She warns that *Hag-Seed* does not exist in a vacuum:

“A Canadian reviewer is reviewing my work from within the culture in which it was written. An American reviewer is reviewing it from outside that culture. The difficulty arises when the American reviewer doesn’t recognize that. Americans have a tendency to regard anything written in English, on the North American continent, as being essentially American, or even “universal.” (Hammond, quoting Atwood, “Articulating” 117).

I, a Taiwanese-American queer man, am writing and reading criticism from outside “the [Canadian] culture,” and for that matter I am also outside most of the other aspects of Margaret Atwood’s lived experience. Some of my analysis thus likely misreads *Hag-Seed* as she intended it. I justify my project against this challenge, however, with Atwood’s own position on authorship: that “the reader is the violinist of the score that is the book” (Tolan, quoting Atwood). Atwood believes in readers as the creators of meaning from their use of the text, just as a violinist interprets a score into a musical performance. Her “score” analogy mirrors Elizabeth Ammons’ explanation that a 21<sup>st</sup> century reader must carefully condemn some parts of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. I read permission from Atwood to explore the meaning of *Hag-Seed* as it appears to me. The readings that I offer rest on the merits of their own academic reasoning, so long as I do not claim to definitively determine the nature of the work.

### **Disgust**

We are emotionally invested in literature because it invites us to imagine ourselves as players in its universes. When a reader occupies the role of a particular character, they become interested in the literary dynamics surrounding that character – most importantly, that character’s arc and fate. Foundationally, Murray Smith submits that:

“To become allied with a character, the spectator must evaluate the character as representing a morally desirable (or at least preferable) set of traits, in relation to other characters within the fiction” (Smith, 188).

The term “alliance” in this passage is Smith’s term for a successful instance of literary empathy. He posits that a reader, or “spectator” for his film studies purposes, recognizes person-like “traits” in a literary character’s behaviors. If those traits suggest a morally desirable individual, readers then “ally” themselves with the character in question. Alliance, or empathy, means that



the reader cares about that character and experiences the literary world through that character. Though the character is not real, it has become an extension of the reader's emotional network. As a result, the reader bears careful witness to what befalls their chosen character. Out of care, the reader attends to issues like their arc, which is related to the genre of the literary work. For the purposes of this piece, I am interested in tone as the "trait" that a reader observes and genre as the "stakes" that become important for an empathizing reader. Importantly, the reader is invited to care about some stakeholders but not others. In Keen's terms, characters who fall within the "empathetic circle" of a novel are emotionally significant to the reader, but for others the reader is apathetic (Keen). Critical consciousness necessitates an audience that cares about structural analysis. Readers' attention to the novel's structure, then, must generate empathy and avoid apathy, which Smith says is a moral decision. Studying the tonal dimensions of *Hag-Seed* and the related empathic structure, though, is surprising. Atwood achieves empathy through tone, but her characters' moral ambiguity calls Smith's theory into question.

Felix Phillips seems to be a morally imperfect character, so when readers "ally" themselves with his emotional and personal arcs we have to re-evaluate our ideas about morality and empathy. For most of *Hag-Seed*, Felix's tone is unbearably haughty. At the chronological outset of the novel, he has two upsettingly aggressive things to say:

"'Let's make this short,' Felix had opened, as was his habit. He'd noted with distaste the pattern of alternating hares and tortoises on Tony's red tie: an attempt at wittiness, no doubt" (Atwood 18).

Felix thinks Tony can have little to say to him of value, thus he demands that Tony "make it short," which implies that his time is more valuable. He then insults Tony internally for failing his standards of interesting, "witty" art. No matter what animosity they might have between

them, these comments come before Tony has done real damage to Felix's career. From a position of authority, then, Felix is simply punching down on someone who he has decided is inferior. Likewise, Felix expresses his low estimation of the Fletcher Correctional Players' intellects: "He pauses to let this sink in. Wide thinking? What is that?" (Atwood 102). The implication is that his class of felons are unfamiliar with the idiom of "thinking widely," and that they might be completely incapable of serious thought. We know that many of the Players are educated and some exceed Felix in areas such as technical knowledge. Furthermore, we have been given no reason to treat them as lesser humans other than Felix's judgement. Again, Felix's aggression is unwarranted, takes unfair advantage of his authority, and insults other characters without clear impetus. The mean-spiritedness of these comments mars the emotional landscape of the novel. The tone of Felix's insults is one of pure "distaste," as Atwood spells out for us. Felix's "distaste," or in Sianne Ngai's terms "disgust," invites a negative moral judgement of his character.

Our negative moral response to disgust as a tone discourages a reader "alliance" with Felix, but also opens up an opportunity for critical consciousness. Ngai notices that

"the dominant cultural attitude toward this affect [renders] it merely a reflection of deficient and possibly histrionic selfhood...disgust explicitly blocks the path of sympathy in Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiment, and is closely linked to his "unsocial" passions of resentment and hatred" (Ngai, *UF* 119, 335).

Ngai shows that the socialized response that readers have to a disgusted literary character is to judge that character morally deficient. This is not to say that the reader "allies" with the object of disgust, but that disgust itself is intolerable because it is an "ugly feeling." Ngai shows us that the reader thinks of disgust as "unsocial" and "deficient," and as a result the path to empathetic

alliance is “blocked” by moral judgement. Notably, I buy this characterization of dominant cultural responses because I also feel them. The idea is that disgust is an emotion that we are deeply uncomfortable with anyone holding, and we think that expressing disgust is not only selfish but immoral. Per Keen, we might at best feel apathetic toward Felix, but disgust is so distasteful that I think the reader actively avoids alliance with him. Importantly, though, Ngai frames our moral responses to disgust as cultural – in the dominant paradigm, we have connected attitudes such as selfishness and immoderation to that tonal category. Of course, the connection of tone to behavior is exactly the process of “recognition” that Murray Smith observes. The reader validly feels morally opposed to disgust because they operate within the dominant cultural mode. Yet Ngai imagines an alternative cultural attitude toward disgust:

“Is there something morally suspect about one’s disgust for feces or rotting meat? ...

Disgust and envy... are not immoral but amoral” (Ngai, *UF* 340).

Ngai proposes a cultural attitude in which literary disgust does not necessarily generate a feeling of immorality. Her justification is that disgust might be righteous or reasonable; it is simply a stronger version of desire, in that it is an expression of preference. The impact here is that, as we come to empathize with Felix, we can return to our initial, visceral distaste for him and ask whether some part of his disgust is morally permissible.

Felix’s relationship to Tony deepens the confusion about where the reader should align morally. Tony is not without his “definite smirk” as he fires Felix (Atwood 21), and we later see him exhibit the immoral traits of a selfish opportunist. Without much backstory in the novel whatsoever, both characters claim moral right. As a result, we must at least interrogate the structure of morality as it relates to tone, and recognize, as Ngai does, that our initial dislike for Felix arises out of our learned cultural notions rather than any undeniable facts. This is an

instance of critical consciousness: to understand *Hag-Seed*, and to determine who to “ally” with, Atwood forces readers to confront our own ideas about tone. She draws attention to the formal structures of reading by bringing them into conflict in the character of Felix. Yet Ngai’s “amoral” disgust does not explain all of Felix’s misbehavior. Under her framework, his rudeness to the inmates at Fletcher Correctional, who harbor no animosity toward him, is still immoral because it is baseless. This introduces the argument about radical empathy. Despite instances of morally unacceptable behavior, how can we still come to empathize with Felix, and how does that empathy challenge our ideas about literary structure?

In the first place, Atwood offers a redemption subplot for Felix’s haughtiness. By the end of the novel, he has started checking his temper: “He did encourage them to write their own extra material, so he’s not entitled to be grumpy” (Atwood 173). The Felix we meet at the beginning of the novel, who cannot even abide other people’s tie choices, would have taken severe affront at other creative voices in a production of his. Yet instead of thinking or voicing another cruel insult, Felix admonishes himself to check his “grumpy” impulse. The readers observe that Felix has gained comparative moral clarity: he recognizes that he is “not entitled” to throw a fit, because the situation is harmless and well-intentioned. Felix’s reflective capacity answers for our initial diagnosis of “histrionic selfhood;” he seems to have realized the moral issue that the reader has with a bad-faith expression of disgust. Furthermore, the temper that he threatens in this passage – “grumpiness” – has a more mellow connotation than his previous harsh insults. Grumpiness is a passively ornery dissatisfaction about something, whereas early Felix would have sought to actively hurt the Players who wrote the ‘Evil Bro Antonio’ rap. In terms of alliance, the reader can support Felix’s trajectory toward more equitable behavior. The result is not only that the reader may be able to look past the moral problem of Felix’s haughtiness, but

also that the reader's consciousness is directed toward normative tonal structures, because Felix's character is dynamic. More importantly, though, the grief Felix performs invites alliance and opens up more questions for critical consciousness.

### **Sympathy**

Atwood performs a grieving parent routine through Felix, which naturally invites empathy and in so doing insists on morally ambiguous characters' claims to empathy. The overriding tonal depiction of Felix Philips' life in *Hag-Seed* is grief, which comes from the loss of his family. At one point, the Players, who are always concerned with family, broach the subject:

“‘We thought maybe you might like to add something of your own, Mr. Duke.’ His voice is shy...

‘No,’ Felix almost shouts. ‘No, I don’t have anything suitable!...

They can’t possibly know anything about him, and his remorse, his self-castigation, his endless grief.

Half blinded, choking, he blunders down to the fifties period demonstration cell ...’

(Atwood 160).

At the mere thought of his daughter, Felix is overwhelmed by physical paralysis as sorrow and guilt overwhelm him. The scene is disrupted by a sudden shift in his usually calm, professorial demeanor – aurally, he “almost shouts” his objection; physically, he “blunders” away. Felix’s physical reactions belie a momentary loss of control, which his internal dialogue attributes to the “endless grief” always lurking in the back of his mind. I think the reader’s affective response to a passage like this one is clear: we feel for the grieving father because he is unable to live a normal life due to his intense sadness. We know that he has constructed a private dream-Miranda for

himself, and it seems to allow him to escape the reality that she is dead (Atwood 11). It is straightforward to recognize that Felix loves his daughter dearly and is having trouble getting over his death and forgiving himself for failing to prevent it. I would say that we do not feel uncomfortable with a parent expressing such emotions, but instead think that it is right for him to grieve and take on some responsibility for Miranda's death. We can also sympathize with his moral convictions about caring for children. The radical element here is that it contradicts Felix's personal imperfections; we are asked whether our empathy with a grieving parent is tempered by his annoying behaviors in other areas.

Atwood uses Felix's character to attend to the reader's emotional response to grief. Despite the reservations we might have about his professional conduct, we must ally with Felix at least because he has suffered an immeasurable loss and is processing it painfully. I think readers generally do retain some negative feelings about Felix's character, because Atwood provides much justification for thinking Felix immoral. Yet, to bring in Murray Smith, we must observe the interaction that those negative feelings have with our sympathy for Felix as a parent. Simply put, the disgusted and sorrowful tones pull our moral evaluation of the character Felix in opposite directions.

To bring in Freire, Atwood presents a morally complex character as a contradiction which requires closer attention to the norms of reader emotion. A reader who is particularly sympathetic toward Felix, for instance, might conclude that grief should completely dispel our previous animosity toward him. The reasoning in that case would be that every person who loses a child deserves unmitigated sympathy, and also possibly that Felix's "grumpiness" is excusable when he is dealing with intense private pain. I hope that readers do come to such a fully empathetic conclusion, because it would lay the groundwork for radical empathy. That is, if

everyone in a certain situation is entitled to empathy regardless of their other actions, then the “moral evaluation of traits” which Murray Smith speaks of is not the crux of our emotional investment in literary characters. Such a conclusion would encourage readers to strive for empathy to other morally ambiguous or undesirable characters (or even real people). Yet, simply because it is not quantifiable, I cannot assure that every reader will decide on radical empathy when faced with the moral contradictions of the character Felix Phillips. No matter the conclusion, though, the critical consciousness aspect here stands; readers must pay attention to the tonal and moral dynamics of character in order to understand *Hag-Seed*. An attention to structure alone is sufficient for my argument that Atwood is capturing an audience by playing with tone. Relatedly, our empathy toward Felix's grief draws the reader's attention to the theme of parenthood. Felix's desire for a child partially explains his parental – and at times paternal – relationship to the Fletcher Correctional Players.

### **Cuteness**

Atwood uses a familial, simple tone to depict Felix's relationship with his Players, which imbues the prisoners' characters with a “cuteness” that the reader may find attractive but may also find off-putting. Ngai's analysis of cuteness provides a theoretical backing:

“As Merish puts it, the cute “always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother,” thus “grafting commodity desire onto a middle-class structure of familial, expressly maternal emotion.” (Ngai, *OAC* 60).

There are a few implications in this passage about what “cuteness” as an aesthetic category might be. In literature, the cute object is defined by a lack of direction, or a “search of its mother.” The object appears helpless to an observer, who then feels a need to step in and protect it. Importantly, Ngai suspects some malicious potential in the cute aesthetic (Ngai, *OAC* 65). She

worries that, especially when the cute object is a human character, the “mother-seeking” trope infantilizes that character. Indeed, the notion that the Fletcher Correctional Players – who Atwood assures us are grown, able-bodied, and sometimes violent men – could be helpless does seem somewhat paternalistic. Ngai is right to offer criticism of “cuteness,” and Atwood leaves the reader the task of judging whether she has made a reasonable tonal decision. I contend, though, that the Players’ general lack of artistic education and their physical incarceration do put some real limits on their characters. Helplessness is not an entirely unwarranted emotional place for people without the social capacity to pursue their own desires.

Furthermore, the vulnerability which cuteness raises is precisely what inspires empathy and critical consciousness in readers. When the Fletcher inmates earnestly present the ‘Duke of Milan’ rap for approval, Felix experiences their helplessness himself:

“[Felix] knows that look. Love me, don’t reject me, say I’m in!” (Atwood 158).

In this moment, Atwood sets up the exact “commodity in search of its mother” scenario that Merish and Ngai are interested in. The “look” the Players give Felix is a plea to “love” and “not reject” their artistic creation. They lack the authority to force their contribution into the play, so they appeal to a more powerful figure for help. The implication of this excerpt is that Felix will give in to the Players’ pleas. Atwood gives Felix the position of a bemused parent. He is able to easily “know the look” they give him because its earnestness is simple and innocent. When he approves their rap, Felix acts out the “need to protect” that cute helplessness inspires in her reader. This is another instance of Felix’s character aligning with our moral sentiments. Trivially, the fact that Felix accepts his “mother” role gives us another reason to ally with him. Since the Players inspire a reader response by their sheer vulnerability, we become invested in making sure that they do not come to harm. Atwood gives Felix the work of acting out this moral desire of the



reader's within *Hag-Seed*'s universe. More interestingly, the Players themselves are at this stage easy to empathize with. What we know about them in terms of tone is unimpeachable; they have simple desires and express them through patient appeal. We can easily ally with them if we accept Murray Smith's moral evaluation method. Yet Atwood does not allow our relationship with the Players to remain so simple. Throughout, she reminds us of the dominant cultural context which classifies the Players' characters as irredeemably immoral.

The social ostracization of the Fletcher Correctional Players, juxtaposed with their empathy-worthy tones, raises a critical consciousness issue about incarceration. The Players are convicted criminals, and so already bear a negative moral judgement by Canadian society. Atwood's choice to move Shakespeare to prison cannot help but be significant for the reader's understanding of incarcerated people. Readers, especially those from the United States, will have lived through an era of "moral panic" against accused criminals, followed by a "tough on crime" era (Lee). The initial belief of such a reader might be: 'prisons are good and necessary, because incarcerated people are dangerous and irrational.' The critical legal scholar Michelle Alexander has observed that a recent version of this narrative, the 1990s' "tough on crime" philosophy, persists in the American imagination, with disastrous effects for incarcerated people and for Black, Latino, and/or Muslim American communities (Alexander).

Before he develops a mutually empathetic relationship with his students, Felix also exhibits an internalized stigma against incarceration. He chooses to reference a student, in explaining his work to someone outside the prison, as:

"Native-Canadian background. Conviction: Bootlegging, drug-pushing..." (Atwood 135).

Even the Players' beloved theatre teacher, who is one of the most prison-proximate members of Canadian society, begins by thinking of the inmates in terms of their convictions – he does not even give them the dignity of a name to his friend. The excerpted description of a human being is depressingly condensed to (a non-human) nickname, race, and conviction as primary attributes. It seems that their sins against society are indelible marks on their social selves. They thus may be forever excluded from what Keen calls “empathetic circles,” or people granted empathy within a society. The foundation of an incarcerated character in *Hag-Seed*'s contemporary, dominant-culture context, then, is inherently tinged with immorality.

Atwood's empathetic treatment of her incarcerated figures concretely politicizes critical consciousness by applying it to a specific context. Her use of “cuteness,” or helpless simplicity (Ngai, *OAC* 74), grants the Players some morally preferable traits. As with Felix, the reader must reconcile contradictory moral vectors to decide whether to “ally” with or feel apathy toward the Players. That process of reconciliation is itself the critical consciousness moment, because Atwood has drawn the reader's attention to the structure of reader empathy. Further, the Players provide an explicitly political dynamic for critical evaluation. The sharp contrast between the irredeemable prisoner stereotype and their actual sweet personalities does not arise from tone. Atwood is content to treat them kindly with her narrative voice throughout. Instead, the fear of prisoners comes from dominant cultural norms about incarcerated people. In attending to their empathetic orientations, the reader thus must interrogate the political forms that construct a threatening narrative around incarceration. The radical aspects of our empathy for the Players are that it forces us to contend with the political dynamics of incarcerated characters, and it asks whether we can feel unmitigated empathy for such characters. Still, Atwood is not content with a simple answer, i.e. ‘the political norms around incarceration are bad, because prisoners are

actually good.' Instead, she challenges the reader to ask whether some individuals might be morally irredeemable. Murray Smith's term "morally preferable" becomes particularly relevant when Atwood gestures at a class of incarcerated characters who may actually deserve automatic condemnation.

The unnamed maximum-security inmates of Fletcher Correctional provide a less preferable moral Other against which the reader can justify empathy for the Players. Indeed, though Atwood establishes them as a peripheral presence, they structurally fall outside of her narrative's empathetic circle because we never hear their voices. Instead, they are described in absence:

"Serial killers and baby-fuckers ... are in the maximum wing... For their own protection. My guys don't approve of that kind of thing" (Atwood 140).

The tone of this passage is prideful: Felix boasts that "his guys" as having an internal code of honor, which (violently) rejects those who have done more unforgivable acts. Atwood is happy to draw a clear moral limit by which the empathy of *Hag-Seed* does not extend to "serial killers and baby-fuckers." If the maximum-security characters' heinous crimes were not enough of a moral stain for the reader, the reader's "allies" voice a hard rejection from the empathetic circle of the novel. Atwood even invokes the language of camaraderie: Felix, "his guys," and the reader stand opposite the maximum-security prisoners, who are the "disapproved of" out-group. Since the maximum-security inmates never appear, they do not receive any space for emotional investment; they exist only as objects of a negative tone.

To reinvolve Smith, then, the characters that Atwood does invite empathy for are "at least morally preferable" to some other group in the novel. Even while we sort out to what degree Felix and the Players deserve our empathy, they at least deserve empathy more than "serial

killers and baby-fuckers.” Importantly, the nature of critical consciousness is such that the reader does not need to accept Atwood’s unforgiving stance toward the maximum-security wing. She has only delineated the extent of empathy she is willing to give. The reader, whose attention to empathy and morality has already been established, can then evaluate Atwood’s decision. In a parallel to Ngai’s work with disgust, Atwood’s combined usage of the Players and their maximum-security counterparts moves incarceration from an “immoral” category to an “amoral” category. The point is that the reader is asked not only to attend to the emotional dynamics of reading *Hag-Seed* but is encouraged to develop complex critical opinions. Besides the critical questions that are raised from deciding who to empathize with, though, I am also interested in the effects of readers empathizing with Felix and the Players as agents of revenge.

Once readers ally with their chosen characters, their interest in the novel becomes tied to the fate of those stakeholders. An Atwood poem about reading painful narratives rings interestingly here:

“The facts of this world seen clearly  
are seen through tears; ...

Witness is what you must bear” (Atwood, *Selected* 71-74).

In the original “Notes Towards A Poem That Can Never Be Written,” Atwood is reminding her readers that it is important to listen to accounts of pain to “clearly” confront political realities. People must therefore “bear witness” to each other’s “tears” so that they can accurately address problems in the world. For literary empathy, though, “bearing witness” is about ceding some control to the text. The reader, having emotionally invested in characters, must follow the text to find out what happens to those characters. The reader of *Hag-Seed* witnesses its progression from just outside the literary universe, and so is emotionally impacted by, but cannot influence,

the plot. Atwood places the reader into intentionally difficult emotional situations, which the reader must then parse to make any sense of the text. The act of parsing – weighing the moral worth of actions and characters, confronting previously held beliefs – is critical consciousness, which is itself progressive and which can be directed toward concrete progressive goals, e.g. prison reform or abolition.

### **Conclusion**

There is much work left to do in exploring critical consciousness of Margaret Atwood's form. The areas of *Hag-Seed* that I analyze in this text are hardly exhaustive; as Caroline Levine reflects, a literary work is a site of many overlapping forms. I have managed to raise many questions but can provide few answers. This is, in part, the point. It is inherently progressive to ask questions about the “norms,” to use Freire's term, that we find in literature and which often have parallels in real life. Raising questions means that we are adopting a healthy skepticism toward the forms we find ourselves in. It allows us to understand that some of our ideas might be constrained by the ideas that can exist within our political structures. Most importantly, it teaches us to do structural interrogation of many different types of form; even if Levine's idea of a “universalizable form” is shaky, we have learned the framework for analyzing structure. Some applications of that framework include Marxist historical materialism and postcolonial perspectives on culture. I admit, though, that asking questions is not quite enough for a progressive political project. My hope is that critical consciousness will spur creative and critical defenses of new structural alternatives. Examples of such alternative range from emotionally optimistic campaigns (rather than revenge-based politics) to pure Communism (as the next evolution of the means of production). Literature such as *Hag-Seed* already has an essential progressive purpose in that it teaches critically conscious questioning. In the future, it may also

do the work of argument, which – imbued with the emotional power of things like reader empathy – could be a more successful version of the progressive prose polemic.

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