Biblical Allusions In Shakespeare's Hamlet

When Shakespeare wrote Hamlet in the sixteenth century, religion and the church dominated England and the freedom of its citizens. Theater was an aspect of society that was controlled greatly. Therefore, the church made a large impression on Shakespeare’s dramas, and one of Shakespeare’s most famous works, Hamlet, included numerous Biblical allusions. These innuendos to The Bible add to the play’s complexity and social relevance. Due to the dominance of the church, Shakespeare’s work was greatly influenced by religion and includes many references to the Bible and other aspects of Christian beliefs.

During Shakespeare’s time, theater was a very controversial topic. Many members of the Catholic, Protestant, and Puritan beliefs considered it to be sacrilegious, leading the church to censor the content of dramas. According to Shell, “Elizabethan England of the late 1850s and early 1890s, where Shakespeare’s first surviving plays were performed and printed, was one of the most antitheatrical climates that England has ever known” (30). Antitheatricalism was extremely common, leading the church to control the content of plays in order to protect society from receiving a negative message. For example, death was believed to be the only forgiveness for an act of revenge, so revenge plots always ended with tragedy. Hamlet exemplifies this limitation to literature because Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius each lost their lives after the completion of their revenge, which tailored the play to fit perfectly into the religious restrictions.

Along with the church censoring revenge plots, they also greatly opposed suicide and censored it as well. If an indiviudal of that time was caught attempting suicide, they would be exucuted publicly. This contributed to Hamlet’s continual internal struggle of being denied the right to commit suicide. In his first soliloquy, Hamlet said:

O, that this too too sullied flesh would melt,

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,

Or that the Everlasting had not fixed

His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God, God!

How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable

Seem to me all the uses of this world (Shakespeare 1.2. 129-134)!

While it is evident that Hamlet desired to end his life, the religious constraints of the time refused him that liberty. This stemmed from the church’s control over the content of plays and the messages they presented, which is comparative to today’s government regulation of the media to only present content deemed “politically correct.”

The concept of Heaven and Hell was referenced numerous times in Hamlet. The major issue with King Hamlet’s death was the fact that he was murdered before being able to repent of his sins, sending him to Hell. During this time period, individuals believed they would go to Hell if

they had a single, unforgiven sin in their life. This provides yet another example of the religious influence on Hamlet. The ghost of King Hamlet described his death by saying, “(I was) cut off even in the blossoms of my sin… no reckoning made, but sent to my account with all my imperfections on my head” (Shakespeare 1.5. 76-79). Therefore, when Claudius murdered King Hamlet, he still had sins in his life, so he was sent to Hell.

Also, this explains why Hamlet did not kill Claudius while the king was praying and completely exposed. At that moment, Hamlet expressed his thoughts aloud, saying, “Am I then revenged to take him in the purging of his soul when he is fit and seasoned for passage? No. Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent” (Shakespeare 3.3.85-89). Hamlet assumed that Claudius was repenting of his sins, concluding that he would be rewarding his uncle for his terrible deed by sending him to heaven. Therefore, Hamlet decided to wait for a time that Claudius was deep in his sins to kill him, in the same manner that Claudius killed King Hamlet.

Because England was so controlled by religion, Shakespeare utilized multiple scriptural allusions, which allowed the audience to relate with the content of the dramas. Hamlet contained numerous references to The Bible, and one of the most obvious parallels is between Prince Hamlet and King David of the Old Testament. According to McDanel García, both of these “charismatic giants of history and literature” share qualities and actions that are unmistakable, which pertains to the influence of religious attributes on Shakespeare’s plays (309).

King David was an extremely intelligent individual, which was a characteristic that Shakespeare also adorned on Hamlet. When the two characters posed as a threat to a powerful king, their actions were undeniable similar. In First Samuel, King David found himself in a predicament with Achish, King of Gath. As stated in The Bible:

12 And David laid up these words in his heart, and was sore afraid of Achish the king of Gath.

13 And he changed his behaviour before them, and feigned himself mad in their hands, and scrabbled on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle fall down upon his beard.

14 Then said Achish unto his servants, Lo, ye see the man is mad: wherefore then have ye brought him to me?

15 Have I need of mad men, that ye have brought this fellow to play the mad man in my presence? shall this fellow come into my house? (I Samuel 21:12-15).

In this biblical text, David acted mad in order to diminish the threat that he posed to King Achish. McDanel García further explained this story by saying, “Having run away from Saul and finding himself in grave danger in the kingdom of Gath, David demonstrates his acting ability when he, like Hamlet, resorts to playing a madman to avoid being murdered by King Achish (McDanel García 309).” This use of his intellect allowed King David to protect himself from the enemy king.

In the same fashion, Hamlet acted mentally ill in order to seem less threatening to King Claudius, concealing his revenge plan. After talking to the ghost, Hamlet reveals his plan to Horatio saying, “I perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on” (Shakespeare 1.5.172-173). Hamlet, just like King David, was very intelligent and saw madness

as the best way to avoid the suspicion of Claudius. Therefore, he abruptly shifted from sane to insane in a bipolar sort of way. This perfectly parallels King David because both men used madness as a disguise of their identity and actions (Veith 72-73).

Another biblical allusion in Hamlet is the comparison of Claudius to the serpent in The Bible that deceived Adam and Eve while they were in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The ghost of King Hamlet connected these characters as he revealed the details of his murder to his son, Hamlet. The ghost referenced his murderer by saying,“The serpent that did sting thy father’s life / Now wears his crown” (Shakespeare 1.5. 39-40). Because Claudius had claimed the throne, it is evident that the ghost is referencing him as the serpent. Claudius deceived King Hamlet and Queen Gertrude, along with the entire Kingdom of Elsinore, just as the serpent of Genesis deceived Adam and Eve, affecting the rest of humanity. The implications of this connection acknowledge Shakespeare’s intention of connecting Hamlet with The Bible.

Another biblical story that is referenced in Hamlet is the story of Cain and Abel. Cain murdered his brother, Abel, because he was jealous that God showed favor on his offering over Cain’s (Holy Bible Genesis 4). Claudius likens the murder of his brother, King Hamlet, to that of Cain and Abel by saying, “Oh my offence is rank. It smells to heaven. / It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, / A brother’s murder. Pray can I not” (Shakespeare 3.3. 37-39). This is a distinct correlation between the two murders, thus reflecting The Bible as a majorly influential component on the plot of Hamlet.