

**Religious Education Support**

**Second Level Support Service**

**The Influence of the Bible on Literature**

*Please note that the following article is background information only on this topic.*

'People cannot expect to understand much of literature - from John Milton to TS Eliot - without learning the Bible first'

– Andrew Motion, British Poet Laureate

**Poetry:**

**Song for Simeon** by *T.S. Eliot*

Eliot fleshes out the story of the presentation in the temple, from Simeon's point of view. Simeon, now an old man, is glad he has seen Jesus, and is now happy to die. He feels too tired to face into all the persecutions that Christians will suffer and feels he has done enough – 'Not for me the martyrdom, the ecstasy of thought and prayer'.

**Journey of the Magi** by *T.S. Eliot*

Eliot imagines what the three wise men might have felt on their famous journey – a tough journey, with self-doubt, wondering if they should have bothered, meeting physical obstacles, and finding the result of their journey "satisfactory". They would do it again, but in ways it felt like a death as well as a birth. Now they will feel ill at ease when they go home to 'an alien people clutching their gods'. The journey motif is powerful and works as a reflection of Eliot's own spiritual journey into Christianity.

**A Christmas Childhood** by *Patrick Kavanagh*

So many Christmas poems tap into the familiar Christmas imagery, mostly derived from Luke's gospel. In this touching and nostalgic poem Kavanagh remembers past Christmases with these familiar images –

'Outside the cow-house my mother  
Made the music of milking;  
The light of her stable-lamp was a star  
And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle'.

**Noel: Christmas Eve, 1913** by *Robert Bridges*

Prompted by the sound of Christmas bells, the poet reflects on the meaning of 'that first Christmas of all'. The bells become for him 'starry music/Angels' song', as the words of Jesus become alive for him – 'The old words came to me by the riches of time'.

**The Prodigal** by *Elizabeth Bishop*

Bishop takes the familiar story of the Prodigal Son and teases out the possibilities. She concentrates on his time in the pigsty, when some of his troubles seem to stem from alcohol ('he hid the pints behind a two-by-four'). This is probably a thinly veiled version of her own problems with alcohol, but while it's not strong on the forgiveness and reconciliation theme in the original story, there is hope at the end with the suggestion the prodigal will get to go home.

**Love** by *George Herbert*

Herbert takes up the familiar banquet imagery from many of the parables of Jesus and develops it into a really touching poem. The poet turns up at the banquet of heaven, but feels unworthy to enter ('guiltie of dust and sinne'). Love, the hostess, (God) has to persuade him to enter – after all, 'know you not who bore the blame'. He gets argumentative but eventually agrees to enter as a servant (shades of the Prodigal Son), but Love insists that he come in as a full guest ('you must sit down and taste my meat'). In a short poem Herbert manages to cover themes of love, forgiveness, Eucharist, even purgatory.

**When I Consider** by John Milton

In this sonnet, also known as *On His Blindness*, Milton reflects on the parable of the talents – his talent in this case is his writing, and with this gift he wants to serve God, but then he loses his sight and wonders how he can continue in this service. Remembering the parable he expects God to be severe with him if he leaves the talent unused. Eventually he concludes that just being available and willing to serve is enough – ‘They also serve who only stand and wait’.

**No Worst There is None** by Gerard Manley Hopkins

This is one of Hopkins’ ‘terrible sonnets’ – revealing his emotional and spiritual pain. This is probably the most painful of them all, and echoes Christ’s experience in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross – ‘Comforter, where, where is your comforting?’

**That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and on the Comfort of the Resurrection**

by Gerard Manley Hopkins

A celebration of the resurrection in Hopkins’ inimitably difficult style. The more specific references to the Resurrection are reasonably accessible – ‘Enough! The Resurrection’ / A heart’s clarion! Away grief’s grasping, joyless days, dejection’.

**Easter** by George Herbert

A clever poem where Herbert urges himself to praise the risen Lord with ‘both heart and lute’ – an interesting combination of how the emotions and the arts join together to celebrate a biblical event.

**At the Round Earth’s Imagin’d Corners** by John Donne

A touch of the Apocalypse here as Donne cheekily asks God to postpone or delay judgement day so that he can have more time to repent – ‘arise/From death, you numberlesse infinities/Of soules ... But let them sleepe, Lord, and mee mourne a space’.

**One Crucifixion is Recorded** by Emily Dickinson

A cryptic reflection on how we hear mainly about the crucifixion of Jesus but how there are other crucifixions, other sufferings that are more recent, perhaps the poet’s own sufferings or those she observes in the world – ‘Our Lord – indeed – made Compound Witness/ – And yet/ – There’s newer – nearer Crucifixion/ – Than That’.

**This World is not Conclusion** by Emily Dickinson

A positive statement of belief in a life after death, and how those who have faith in this have suffered because of it – ‘To gain it, men have Borne/Contempt of generations/And crucifixion’. She reckons we can’t numb this intuition of a next life – ‘Narcotics cannot still the Tooth/That nibbles at the soul – ‘.

**A Psalm of Life** by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Longfellow imagines a young man challenging what he finds is a rather bleak attitude of the psalmist – ‘Life is real! Life is earnest! / And the grave is not its goal ... Act, -act in the living Present! / Heart within and God o’erhead’. He stresses that ‘we can make our lives sublime’ and even influence others for good, leaving ‘footprints, that perhaps another ... Seeing, shall take heart again’.

**Shakespearean Drama:**

A variety of approaches is possible here. One can find parallels between Shakespeare’s lines and Bible quotations. The influence of the moral Commandments can be examined. One could also measure the plays against the Beatitudes, or examine broader Biblical themes like forgiveness (strong in *King Lear* and *Merchant of Venice*). One could seek out parallels between Biblical characters and Shakespearean characters (e.g. Lady Macbeth has been compared to Jezebel).

## **King Lear (prescribed for Leaving Cert English 2010)**

Bible references – e.g. instances of quotes that match/parallel or seem to be inspired by Biblical quotes – e.g.: One of the dominant themes of this play is filial ingratitude and betrayal. One quote that captures this is: “This villain of mine [his son] comes under the prediction; There's son against/father” from King Lear Act I Sc ii – the prediction might refer to the similar quote from Luke 12: 53: “The father shall be divided against the son and the son against the father”.

King Lear could be viewed as a study of the Commandments from Exodus, especially the 4<sup>th</sup> *Commandment* – there is a stark contrast between the awful ways Regan and Goneril treat their father Lear and the loyalty shown by the misunderstood daughter Cordelia, and likewise in the subplot between the loyal son Edgar and the treacherous Edmund.

Breaking the 6<sup>th</sup> *Commandment*, the evil Edmund seems prepared to commit adultery with the evil sisters if it will gain him advancement.

The 8<sup>th</sup> *Commandment* would also be a useful yardstick in judging the moral aspects of the play – it is rife with deception. Regan and Goneril deceive their father Lear with fancy words of pretended loyalty, while the truth expressed by Cordelia (rather minimally it must be said) is not recognised as truth. Edmund deceives his father Gloucester by framing his innocent brother Edgar. Eventually of course the truth comes out, but not until there is tragedy and insight. Seeing the truth is a key theme – it takes the fathers, Lear and Gloucester a long time to see the truth. In fact Gloucester only ‘sees’ the truth after he has been literally blinded!

Relating to the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> *Commandments*, it could be argued that the increasingly unpleasant daughters Regan and Goneril covet their father’s lands and will resort to betrayal to achieve their ambitions.

### *Beatitudes:*

Kent tries to act as peacemaker between Lear and his daughter Cordelia, and when it doesn’t work because of Lear’s pigheadedness he certainly suffers persecution in the cause of right – summarily exiled. Kent later returns in disguise to comfort the mourning Lear- mourning initially for his loss of respect, and later for the loss of Cordelia. Lear was arrogant, but has to learn to be poor in spirit (“I am a very foolish fond old man”), through his sufferings. He has been a bully and must learn to be meek. Lear wasn’t very good at being merciful or just, e.g. in the way he treated Kent and Cordelia, but later has insights, realizing how justice can often fall victim to political power and wealth - ‘Robes and furred gowns hide all. Plate sin with gold / And the strong lance of justice hurtles breaks’(Act IV Sc vi).

## **Merchant of Venice**

Many useful themes here, especially forgiveness, friendship, tolerance, racism.

On a surface level there are some quotes that may well have inspired directly by Scripture – e.g. ‘You have too much respect upon the world / They lose it that do buy it with much / care’ from Act I Sc i is similar to ‘Whosoever will save his life shall lose it’ from Luke 9: 24. and Matt. 10: 39.

Portia’s famous speech on mercy (from ‘droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven’ (Act IV Sc i) closely follows Ecclesiasticus 35:19 (‘O how faire a thing is mercy in the time of anguish and trouble: it is like a cloud of rain that comes in the time of drought’). In fact that whole ‘quality of mercy’ speech is a powerful reflection on the Biblical theme of mercy.

As with all the Shakespeare plays one could look at how the Commandments relate to the play, e.g.

4<sup>th</sup>: Jessica elopes with a Christian, upsetting her Jewish father Shylock;

5<sup>th</sup>: Shylock is willing to see Antonio die so he can get his ‘pound of flesh’;

8<sup>th</sup>: There is some deception in the play – e.g. the dramatic trial scene in Merchant of Venice when Portia disguises herself as a male lawyer and gives her famous mercy speech.

### *Beatitudes:*

Blessed are the merciful – this is pretty much the message of Portia to Shylock in her famous speech – “The quality of mercy is not strained ...” (Act IV Sc i) Shylock, despite various entreaties stubbornly refuses to show mercy to Antonio, and is not shown mercy when his vindictive efforts fail. In a sense Shylock hungers after justice, but it is a strict heartless justice un-tempered by mercy.

## Othello

Here also there are Bible parallels in the text: e.g.

'Rude am I in speech' from Othello Act I Sc iii matches 'Though I be rude in speech' from 2 Corinthians 11:6. The ability of evil to pretend to be good is a theme found frequently in Shakespeare – 'When devils will their blackest sins put on / They do suggest at first with heavenly shows' from Othello Act II Sc iii, is close enough to 'For Satan himself is transformed into an angel of light' from 2 Corinthians 11: 14.

There is also good mileage to be got from judging the character's actions by the moral vision of the Commandments. Shakespeare for the most part shares this vision as to what's right and wrong:

4<sup>th</sup>: One could accuse Desdemona of not being respectful to her father by eloping with Othello;

5<sup>th</sup>: Othello murders his loving wife Desdemona because he wrongly thinks she's having an affair; the evil Iago murders Roderigo and tries to effect the murder of Cassio.

6<sup>th</sup>: There is much talk of adultery, but the main 'affair' is just a frame up – the nasty but trusted Iago convinces Othello that his wife is unfaithful.

7<sup>th</sup>: Iago steals money from the foolish Roderigo who thinks this money is being used to help him get together with Desdemona. Also in this play a key plot device is Iago's wife Emilia stealing Desdemona's handkerchief that will later be used to convince Othello of Desdemona's unfaithfulness.

8<sup>th</sup>: Iago pretends to be a loyal friend of Othello, as if he's doing Othello a favour by lying to him about Desdemona's alleged affair.

9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>: Iago is jealous and vengeful when Othello promotes Cassio over him – he covets this promotion and plots evil in revenge. Othello is consumed by jealousy (whipped up at every opportunity by Iago) when he thinks that Cassio is having an affair with his wife. Though generally a levelheaded man, especially when it comes to politics, he fails to control his jealousy leading again to tragic consequences.

*Beatitudes*: Once again mercy is central. Even if Othello was right about Desdemona's alleged affair, he is merciless towards her – without proper evidence he is determined to kill her, imagining this to be some sort of justice – despite the fact that she begs for mercy. Iago mercilessly taunts Othello, winding him into a fury over the imagined affair. The innocent Desdemona could be a model of 'pure in heart' and 'meek', though not meek in any mousy sense as she does speak up for herself to Othello.

## Macbeth

*Scripture parallels*: 'God above/Deal between thee and me' from Macbeth Act IV : Sc iii. matches 'God is witness betwixt me and thee' from Genesis 31: 50.

Macbeth's miserable point of view on life, at the end of the play, 'Life's but a walking shadow/... it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing'. (Macbeth Act V Sc v) is similar in sentiment to two quotes from the Psalms: 'We spend our years as a tale that is told' (Ps. 90: 9), and 'Man is like to vanity: his days are a shadow that passeth away' (Psalms 144: 4).

*Commandments audit!*

5<sup>th</sup>: Shakespeare's tragedies in particular abound with examples – these plays usually end with a high body count! Macbeth kills King Duncan so that he can take the crown for himself. He agonises before the murder, in a famous battle with his conscience in Act I Sc vii , but having done it becomes more callous and organizes many more cruel killings.

8<sup>th</sup>: Macbeth and his wife pretend to welcome King Duncan to their home, while secretly plotting his murder. This play is full of great imagery for deception – e.g. –'Look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under't' – and 'make our faces vizards to our hearts'.

9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>: Macbeth seriously covets the crown, as does his wife. But he doesn't control it and allows his own ambition, that of his wife, and the 'supernatural soliciting' of the witches to urge him on to murder.

*Beatitudes*: The play *Macbeth* could be read as a sort of anti-Beatitudes. Not that Shakespeare would be promoting any evil behaviour but that the main characters corrupt and undermine the ideals of the Beatitudes. From the beginning Macbeth is a war maker not a peacemaker. He foolishly thinks he can gain his own personal peace by murdering anyone he perceives is a threat. Lady Macbeth and himself are as far from being pure in heart or poor in spirit or meek as one could imagine – they are ambitious for power and ruthless in the way they seek it. They think they will inherit the earth or possess the land by murdering their way to it – they have contempt for meekness – Lady Macbeth calls on the 'instruments of darkness' to root out

any gentleness that might be in her. They show no mercy, even to the innocent and harmless Lady Macduff and her children. Far from suffering persecution in the cause of right, they are the ones who *inflict* persecution on others. Their opponents Macduff and Malcolm could be said to hunger and thirst for justice, but their motives are tainted somewhat by revenge.

## Hamlet

### *Scripture parallels:*

'There's a special providence in the fall of a sparrow' from Act V Sc ii echoes 'Not one of them (sparrows) is forgotten before God' from Luke 12: 6. and Matt. 10: 29.

From the confession scene in Act III Sc iii: 'What if this curs'd hand/Were thicker than itself with brother's blood?/Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens,/To wash it white as snow?' is close to 'Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow' from Isaiah 1: 18.

'What a piece of work is man, how/noble in reason, how infinite in faculty,/in form and moving how express and/admirable, in action how like an angel' – a striking quote from Hamlet. Act II Sc ii, could well have been inspired by 'What is man that thou are mindful of him . . . thou hast made him ... a little lower than the angels' from Psalms. 8: 4 and Heb. 2: 6.

There's a creepy quote from Hamlet Act I Sc i. 'And the grave stood tenantless, and/the sheeted dead did squeal and/gibber in the Roman streets', that's uncannily close to 'And the graves were opened and many bodies of the saints which slept arose and came out of their graves' from Matt. 27: 52.

### *Commandments:*

4<sup>th</sup>: Hamlet tries to honour his father by avenging his murder – not quite the Christian way! He tries to show respectful restraint with his mother but blasts her verbally for her adultery.

5<sup>th</sup>: Claudius kills his brother King Hamlet Snr so that he can take the crown. Like many Shakespearean villains he has some regrets but is prepared to commit more murders (including that of Hamlet Jnr) to maintain his position.

6<sup>th</sup>: Claudius kills his brother not just to get the kingship, but to get his brother's wife, with whom he has been having an affair.

7<sup>th</sup>: Claudius steals the crown, wife and life from his brother King Hamlet.

8<sup>th</sup>: Plenty of deception here as usual – e.g. Claudius arranging Hamlet Snr's murder to look like natural death, Laertes plotting to kill Hamlet in what seems a fair sword fight (the sword tip is poisoned)

9<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup>: In *Hamlet* Claudius not only covets his neighbour's wife, but his brother's wife, and acts out his desire. In both plays Shakespeare shows how coveting can lead to evil deeds if not held in check.

*Beatitudes:* *Hamlet* is the least Beatitude orientated of these plays and one would have to force the connections. Young Hamlet and Laertes want to get those who killed their fathers, but this more for vengeance than justice – they are prepared to kill to achieve their ends. They mourn their fathers, but in a dark, brooding, vengeful way. Ophelia is closest to being pure in heart, as most others are either seriously evil (esp. Claudius) or morally tainted (e.g. the adulterous Gertrude).

Compiled by Brendan O' Regan  
CBS, Arklow