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Religious Elements in Shakespeare's Hamlet

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Objectives

Introduction

Teaching in a public school, with its sensitivity to the maintenance of relativism in thinking, can be a hindrance to an understanding of religious issues. Yet in the areas of virtue, morality, or ethics, all acknowledged to play a role in the development of human character, religion may be found to be inextricably linked. Religion is pervasive. It crystallizes. It absorbs. One cannot stand in front of students and dance around it; religion is a force with which to contend, especially if Shakespeare is in the literary canon for the year.

Purpose

If one is to teach the students about the most central influences in early English Literature, they need to understand the potency of religion within the English canon. In the beginning of the school year, we spend three weeks analyzing *Oedipus the King*, *The Alchemist*, and *Hamlet*, with regard to man's free will vs. a pre-determined destiny, a common theme in each text. Then, the three-week unit on Religious Elements in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is taught. After this unit, students will have a good understanding of the role that religion plays in society, historically and at present. Finally, a serious engagement with the primary texts that comprise early English Literature will occur. Because students need not only to understand the importance of religion but also history, politics, and morality in literature, students need further exposure and further practice in identifying the role of religion, among other learning curves, in the following texts during a ten-week unit: Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, Langland's *Piers Plowman*, *Everyman*, Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Rationale

Because *Hamlet* is peppered with religious allusions, it also encompasses the theme of the struggle between man's free will and man's pre-determined destiny. Therefore, this text serves as a nice gateway from the primary three weeks of the school year - with a focus on fate vs. free will - into the latter ten weeks of the first semester - with the focus on the influence of religion, history, politics, and morality in English literature.

Background

To appreciate the unit in full, students will need to know the following background information:

Hamlet

Students need to have read the play, *Hamlet*¹ (the Folger Shakespeare Library edition is recommended for high school students) at least once thoroughly, and have recognized as well the major themes of love, adultery, incest, death, madness, suicide, revenge, virtue, and sin, etc. in the play. Please note that this unit can be modified to teach younger grades, ranging in the 6-12th grades. Modifications suitable for the teacher and students are encouraged and necessary.

A synopsis of the play follows:

The play begins by introducing the young prince of Denmark, Hamlet, whose father died one month ago and whose mother has decided to marry his Uncle Claudius, now King of Denmark. Only until the appearance of a ghost resembling his father, the late King Hamlet, does Hamlet have a motive for animosity towards his uncle: the ghost father tells Hamlet that Claudius poured poison into King Hamlet's ear, thus killing him, so that Claudius could usurp the crown and marry Hamlet's mother, Gertrude. The rest of the play lies in Hamlet's ability to believe this ghost to be trustworthy, and not diabolical, as he pretends to be mad while attempting completion of his ghost father's command. A series of major catastrophes ensue: Hamlet rejects his former lover, Ophelia; Hamlet kills Ophelia's father, Polonius, on the premise that it was Claudius; Ophelia goes mad after the death of her father; Hamlet stages a play within a play to decide whether or not Claudius was to blame; Hamlet decides against killing Claudius while his uncle prays, but to do so instead at a future moment when he would surely die and go to hell; Ophelia's brother, Laertes, and Claudius plan a conspiracy against Hamlet; Laertes challenges Hamlet to a fencing match with Hamlet using the rapier poisoned by Claudius; Claudius poisons a cup of wine, in the event that Hamlet should win the swordfight; Gertrude accidentally drinks the poisoned wine; Laertes accidentally gets stabbed with the poisoned rapier; the dying Hamlet denounces Claudius to the public once Laertes reveals the truth; and Fortinbras's army comes to reclaim the throne of Denmark. The story ends.

Religion

Definition of Religion

A common understanding of religion must be taught to the students before they begin the unit: "Religion" as adopted originally from Anglo-French in the 11th C, connected with 'religate' with the prefix 're' meaning again or back together with the root 'gate' to bind up, together, or to bind (people).² Therefore, in a sense, religion binds up man, i.e. makes man whole, but also, it can unify people.

The Importance of Religion

Students need to assess why religion merits the attention it receives in daily life across the world. General discussion may ensue from an in-class informal discussion. Students should then turn to learning about why Shakespeare believed religion to be so important.

Shakespeare understood humans with such ingenuity that his intelligence seems incomparable. The level of candor, wit, and mellifluous ease with which he manipulated his characters to correctly portray human life is

impressive, and not yet superseded by other playwrights. With his basic understanding of man and man's folly, Shakespeare's mastery lies in this: Shakespeare publicly exposed man's free will. His plays rested on his *facil* honesty about a human's free will and his destiny, understood as a struggle between a life that was predestined by the gods vs. a life of exercised choice. Shakespeare's popularity, though, rested on the exposure of man's vices, i.e., man's inability to choose paths that would eventually guide him to his pre-determined destiny. I think Shakespeare understood that each man does not want to admit to God's will, and therefore exercises the choice not to, yet by doing so remains ignorant that God's will is what enables him to live most happily in the end:

Understanding this, the Christian artist can perfect the logic of tragedy. He can give to any tragic downfall its proper shape as a 'mistaken' version of religious self-abandonment, a topsy-turvy Salvationism. Then, when the total action is rehearsed before an audience, some spectators will afterwards say, 'How sad it had to be thus'; whereas others, who see the deeper meaning, will say, 'How sad it had to be thus when it might have been otherwise.'³

If tragedy exposes the "high calling man might have achieved, by showing us the empty shadow of it which he has chosen as his fate,"⁴ then, for entertainment purposes, Shakespeare manipulates mankind's weakness in avoiding destiny by abusing his free will. As theater-goers, we identify with this weakness, simultaneously expressing admiration and hatred of it. We love him for this: "In Shakespeare, the future is open. It contains the possibility of the new, both as a result of action which man may take and as result of growth and the providential shaping of events that lie outside man's control."⁵

Shakespeare's Religion

If students are to understand religion during Shakespeare's life, they must understand that "the playwright was probably brought up in a Roman Catholic household in a time of official suspicion and persecution of recusancy."⁶ We must also be aware of the following entry that generally typified the feeling of the end of the 16th Century and the beginning of the 17th:

I was hardly tucked away when the pursuivants broke down the door and burst in. They fanned out through the house, making a great racket. The first thing they did was to shut up the mistress of the house in her own room with her daughters, then they locked up the Catholic servants in different places in the same part of the house. This done, they took possession of the place (it was a large house) and began to search everywhere, even lifting up the tiles of the roof to expose underneath them and using candles in the dark corners. When they found nothing, they started knocking down suspicious-looking places. They measured the walls with long rods and if the measurements did not tally they pulled down the section that they could not account for. They tapped every wall and floor for hollow spots; and on sounding anything hollow they smashed it in.⁷

While Shakespeare lived with family friends during his father's financial troubles, it is known that the devoutly Catholic Houghtons "almost certainly illegally harbored priests, along with illegal ritual objects and a large collection of banned or suspect books."⁸ This was a time when Christians lived in great fear of being persecuted for believing in the Catholic faith.

Although it is confirmed that Shakespeare was raised in a Catholic family,⁹ it remains unclear as to what religion he espoused. Nonetheless, the "precocious adolescent - recommended by Cottam as intelligent,

reasonably well educated, discreet, and securely Catholic –¹⁰ would have lived a life that compromised his self-identity:

Will would have lived a life of secrets, where even the lowliest servant knew things – a locked cabinet containing the chalice, books, vestments, and other objects with which to celebrate Mass; mysterious strangers bearing ominous rumors of Mary, Queen of Scots, or of Spanish armies; muttering of conspiracies – that could, if revealed, bring disaster upon the family.¹¹

Whether Shakespeare was a Catholic or a Protestant matters not; he most certainly was a Christian, but with the Catholic-Protestant struggle taking place in his early years of maturation, Shakespeare was smart enough to avoid getting caught up in a "glorious, treasonous, suicidal crusade. If his father was both Catholic and Protestant, William Shakespeare was on his way to being neither."¹² Instead of wasting his time proclaiming allegiance to one, Shakespeare efficiently capitalized on what it was he did well: "Will had...been making a mark – probably for the first time in his life – as an actor; he had begun to sense what he was capable of doing and what he had within him."¹³

That being said, he directed his attention to acting. Will used this struggle between the Catholic and Protestant balance of religious power to fuel his entertainment purposes; i.e., he used this struggle for power as a source of amusement in his plays. Students should note that in every Shakespearean play, Will pits his characters in a struggle for "x" and "y" or "z" sorts of power. Religion was just another question within 16th C life that needed an answer. It was not simply about the religious contention of the Protestants v. Catholics in the social atmosphere in this century, it was also about the struggle between men and women, princes and kings, love and adultery, honesty and disloyalty, the rich and the poor, politics and ethics, virtue and sin, heaven and hell, life and death, God and man. Shakespeare saw this, capitalized on it, and used it for the benefit of his playwriting success. Therefore, he disregarded any allegiance to prescribed biases, but rather fueled the plot of his plays with opposites.

Religion During Shakespearean Times

Students must understand the role of theology during Shakespeare's life. In 16th C England, the majority of Christians would have been well versed in theology.¹⁴ "Approximately half of the books published in England between the inception of printing and the parliamentary revolution bore explicitly religious titles, and religious ideas figured prominently..."¹⁵

As insisted upon by Martin Luther, a liberal arts education for Shakespearean pupils consisted of both classical and theological learning. The classics concerned the province of natural truth, while theology concentrated on revelation and salvation.¹⁶ The merging of these two was thought to compose "the best possible basis for future professional endeavor"¹⁷ since this, Luther stated, "provided not only for their [i.e. the citizens'] eternal weal but also for their temporal needs and honor."¹⁸

Just as Shakespeare felt the strain between the Protestant and Catholic struggle for power, he also felt the tension between this converging of classical and theological education, another pair of opposites needing balance. Yet this was commonplace, since Elizabethan men were held accountable for both the advancement of the state and the church.¹⁹ Pupils were expected to master "the majesty of Virgil, the festal grace of Ovid, the rhythm of Horace, and the buskined speech of Seneca"²⁰, but at the same time, "the seventh [day] was devoted, not to rest, but to Biblical instruction and study."²¹

In Shakespeare's time, citizens upheld Luther's view:

...society simply could not be organized and maintained on the basis of purely Christian ethics, for there simply were not enough Christians to make such an organization feasible...[and that] the world cannot be ruled according to the Gospel, for the sphere of influence which the Word has is too small and limited. The Word lays hold of few; not one man in a thousand will accept it.²²

Therefore, we get a master of mergers, an advocate of amalgamations. We get William Shakespeare, the author and playwright who lived in a world of opposites and realized the difficulty of achieving perfect balance between them. Not only did he struggle with this, but also realized that his citizen counterparts fought the same battle. This struggle of opposite realities became the groundwork for his plays:

His remarkable religious allusiveness, and the knowledge of Protestant and Catholic doctrine that it reveals, imply a dramatist interested in religious issues...For Shakespeare to incorporate shifting representations of conflicting religious viewpoints...suggested to me that he was either careless or indifferent or mindfully engaged in juxtaposing and melding Protestant and Catholic doctrinal viewpoints to create his art. Of course, he probably was both, at times utilizing a religious motif to express a secular thought but not much interested – if at all – in the ideational content or associations of the motif. As a busy playwright, he was simply pleased to have found a convenient vehicle for the tenor of his thought.²³

Religion in Shakespearean Plays

In order to continue forward with the unit, and move ahead into a re-reading of the play through a religious perspective, students must comprehend why Shakespeare decided to employ religious allusion in his plays.

It is believed that Shakespeare demonstrated an easy and intimate familiarity with Christian theology, as "Shakespeare more than any other popular playwright of his time had absorbed the language of [the] Prayer Book and [the] Geneva Bible."²⁴

We can deduce that Shakespeare studied Roman plays, as evident from his familiarity with North's Plutarch,²⁵ but it is also surmised that Shakespeare absorbed stories and motifs from the Geneva Bible. In addition to his own free, lively, and inventive literary play, in the Bible Shakespeare "found subtle techniques of storytelling: varied transitions and contrasts between incidents, recurring motifs and correspondences between parallel incidents, and a...variation between...obscuring characters' thoughts and motives."²⁶ Will found, among others, "in Genesis, a combination of creation myth and prose fiction; in Exodus,...a cycle of national histories; in Job, a tragedy; in Ruth,...tragicomic romance; and in Revelation, a masque."²⁷ This is not to say that Shakespeare solely obtained his playwriting ideas from Roman or Biblical sources, but it does guide us in the direction he followed.

As for the playgoer, the common Elizabethan would probably have attended a Shakespearean play without special notice of the allusions to Scripture, Mythology, Prayers, and general dogma. "He would have missed them because to him they were commonplace; we miss them because to us they are almost completely foreign...."²⁸ Scripture was familiar to his audiences; therefore, Shakespeare used it in his plays. "This was one reason why he managed to be popular for as long as he did: he had his finger on the pulse of his audience" while remaining uncommitted to any religion himself.²⁹ Thus, any religious allusions are at ease in the actors' mouths. His allusions "extend the depth of the play itself"³⁰ and function as flexible metaphors extending into

many areas of life: power, politics, religion, race, sexuality, self-identity, etc., as they open previously closed doors to new thoughts about these realms and the play itself.

Religious History

To understand religious allusions in Hamlet, students must first receive instruction in the religious concepts that are being alluded to by Shakespeare throughout the entire play. Please note: all Biblical concepts refer to the New King James Bible version. In no particular order, students should learn the following religious concepts:

Crucifixion³¹ : Students need to know about certain elements of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, specifically, the betrayal of Judas, Jesus facing Pontius Pilate, Jesus taking the place of Barabbas, the soldiers mocking Jesus as he carried the cross, the crucifying of Jesus, Jesus dying on the cross, Jesus buried in Joseph's tomb, and Jesus' ascension from the dead after three days.

Peter's Denial³² : Students need to know about Peter's denial – specifically, about Jesus predicting Peter's betrayal three times before the rooster crows, Peter's resolution not to do so, Peter actually denying association with Jesus on three different occasions, the rooster crowing, and Peter weeping bitterly.

The Trinity³³ : Students need to know about Christians as baptized in "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," i.e., the trinity as the central mystery of Christian faith and life, and that the trinity rests on salvation as being identical with "the history of the way and the means by which the one true God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveals himself to men."

Nicene Creed³⁴ : Students need to know the creeds common to Catholic and Protestant churches, as the Nicene Creed outlines the history of the Christian faith and identifies the terms under which followers express belief.

Last Supper³⁵ : Students need to know about the evening when the Last Supper took place between Jesus and his twelve apostles, specifically about Jesus' prediction of Judas' betrayal, the incarnation of Christ's body and blood, and the promise of salvation for those who believe in the incarnation.

Judas' Betrayal³⁶ : Students need to know that one of Jesus' apostles, Judas, betrayed Jesus by acknowledging him in front of the chief priests and elders who were looking to persecute Jesus. After he kissed Jesus in the Garden in Gethsemane, the guards soon arrested Jesus and paid Judas in silver.

Seven Holy Sacraments³⁷ : Students need to know about the functions of the Seven Sacraments in the Christian Church: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony, with particular attention paid to the Last Rites: how the ill person laments his sins before God, how God's forgiveness initiates the healing, and how this exchange prepares the ill person for death.

Judgment Day³⁸ : Students need to know about the final day where Jesus judges each Christian accordingly, specifically how the unjust merit their place in Hell, while the just earn entry into Heaven.

Ten Commandments³⁹ : Students need to know laws against murder, suicide, incest, truth, adultery, covetousness, etc., which are covered in the Ten Commandments of the Christian faith.

Cain & Abel⁴⁰ : Students need to know the story of Cain and his brother Abel, specifically about how Adam and

Eve bore two sons, and when it came time for each to bring forth an offering to God, only Abel's sacrifice was acceptable to God. Since Cain became jealous of his brother, he killed him, and received punishment from God.

Nine Choirs of Angels⁴¹ : Students need to know the divisions of angels as prescribed by the Catholic Church in descending order of rank, specifically, Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, Virtues, Powers, Archangels, Principalities, and Angels, with particular attention paid to the Cherubim as a symbol of God's knowledge and protection.

Humans as Dust⁴² : Students need to know about the Temptation and Fall of Man in the Garden of Eden, specifically how the serpent tricked Eve into eating fruit from the tree of knowledge, how Eve then passed this fruit onto Adam, who ate it, and God's punishment for each party, with special attention paid to how mankind would, from this point on, return to the earth at death for "out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

Entrance into Heaven⁴³ : Students need to know about what man must do in order to obtain eternal life in heaven. Specifically, man must not only keep the commandments, but also give up his riches to the poor and follow Jesus in all his paths.

Jepthah's Daughter⁴⁴ : Students need to know the story about a man named Jephthah who unintentionally sacrificed his daughter and sent her into exile for two months because of a vow he made to the Lord.

The Lord's Prayer⁴⁵ : Students need to know about the importance of prayer in Christian life, specifically, the main prayer given to believers by God Himself entitled "The Lord's Prayer." This prayer praises God, asks for daily sustenance, and asks that only His will be done on earth. It also implores God to forgive any trespasses we committed so that we may forgive others' transgressions, and it begs that we not be led into temptation, but instead, to be delivered from evil.

Wickedness⁴⁶ : Students need to know about the path leading to hell. Specifically, if a man exhibits pride, gluttony, sloth, and envy, he will not enter heaven.

Seven Deadly Sins⁴⁷ : Students should know the Seven Deadly Sins and their opposite virtues: Pride/Humility, Greed/Generosity, Lust/Chastity, Anger/Meekness, Gluttony/Temperance, Envy/Brotherly Love, Sloth/Diligence.

Reading

Now, after learning the necessary religious background and religious concepts, the students are ready to read the play through a religious lens. Specific scenes need identification within each of the five acts, building on the religious concepts the students have now mastered.

Trinity, Crucifixion, the Last Supper, Peter's Denial, Judas' Betrayal:

Act I. Scene i. L 47-179: At this point, the Ghost has appeared on three different occasions (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit Trinity allusion) and on this third night, as Horatio begs the illusion to stay, the Ghost spreads his arms (crucifixion allusion). The Ghost appears to attempt conversation but then a cock crows in the distance (Peter's denial three times before the cock crowed). Soon after, Marcellus asks if he should strike it with his partisan, in the same manner that Jesus was speared on his left side of his body, out of which flowed holy water (crucifixion allusion). Students need to pay special attention to lines 162-179 because Marcellus

explains that the Ghost's presence faded on the crowing of the cock since the rooster has the power to "awake the God of day" and, at his warning, the bad spirit hides away, "like a guilty thing upon a fearful summons", i.e., for shame of committing any more offenses against Jesus, which is also an indirect allusion to Judas' nighttime betrayal of Jesus for pieces of silver, which initiated the crucifixion of Jesus. Marcellus also explains that on Christmas Eve, the rooster crows all night long so that no bad spirits will appear on such a holy night. The rooster, in their eyes, is a symbol of truth; questions should arise in the students' minds as to whether the spiritual integrity of the Ghosts is good or evil.

The Trinity

I.ii.208-232: In these lines, Horatio and Marcellus explain the appearance (three times) of King Hamlet's Ghost and convince Hamlet that it was attempting to converse but shrank away in haste at the sound of the cock crowing. Students need to understand that there is something mysterious about the number three (reference to the Trinity) and the symbolism behind the crowing cock dispelling bad behavior from dead spirits (in reference to Jesus' words during the Last Supper, Peter's Denial, and Judas' Betrayal).

I.v. 14: The phrase, "I am thy father's spirit" will continue to haunt Prince Hamlet for the rest of his life. Is this ghost merely an illusion of the mind? Is it a deadly apparition created from the house of Satan? Or is it the remaining third part of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, which resides in the corporeal body and departs from the body with the last breath?

V.ii.390: In his last words, Hamlet cries, "The potent poison quite o'ercrows my spirit," meaning, the poison has killed him like a crowing cock, thus triumphs over his Holy Spirit. Students should remember that the Holy Spirit resides in each human's body, according to Christian belief.

The Crucifixion

III.iv.19: Hamlet states that "not by the rood" has he forgotten his mother. In archaic usage, the rood is the crucifix.⁴⁸

Entrance into Heaven:

I.iii. 50-55: When Ophelia listens to sage advice from her brother about remaining chaste and virtuous, she begs the same of him so that he might travel the path toward heaven also. She wants him to heed his own advice and do what he advises others to do: remain faithful to God and hold fast to the Ten Commandments to gain entry into heaven after death.

Ten Commandments:

I.iii. 135-140: In a similar situation, Ophelia's father, Polonius, is counseling his daughter about trusting seemingly virtuous persons. He advises her to beware of Hamlet's beguiling emotions that, much like unholy persons dressed in holy garb, are volatile and misleading. Students should know that one of the Ten Commandments is "thou shalt not lie."

II.ii. 390; II.ii.55; II.ii.603: Here, the fourth commandment is broken by the uttering of "'Sblood," "'Sbody," and "'Swounds," the former oaths taking Christ's blood and body, i.e. God, in vain; the latter disregarding Christ's crucifixion wounds.

V.ii.324: Laertes almost succeeds in his inclinations to be honest with Hamlet about the fairness of the fencing

match. He states, "And yet it is almost against my conscience" which lets the reader know that he realizes he is breaking the sixth and ninth commandments, "Thou shalt not murder" and "Thou shalt not bear false witness."

Nine Choirs of Angels:

I.iv.42-50: Hamlet questions the integrity of the Ghost because his sanity depends on it. Whether this ghost be an evil spirit (why would it be seeking revenge post-mortem?) or whether this ghost be a good spirit (with pure intentions in the interest of justice), Hamlet begs clarity from the angels above. The Cherubim, who symbolize God's knowledge and protection, would be the most helpful of the choirs here.

IV.iv.56: Hamlet intends that the cherubim can see right through Claudius' purposes. Students should remember that the cherubim represent not only God's protection, but also His knowledge.

Judgment Day

I.v. 93-95: The Ghost of King Hamlet exhorts his son to leave his mother "to heaven" and defends Gertrude's innocence. She will be judged in God's eyes on Judgment Day, in the same manner as Mary, the mother of Jesus: innocent, pure, virtuous, unstained, and free from shame. Students should question Gertrude's holiness, either in comparison or contrast with Mary.

The Lord's Prayer

I.v. 146-147: After interaction with his father's ghost, Hamlet feels a need to pray. Hamlet is likely expressing a need for deliverance from evil and asking that God's will alone be done, to ensure that this ghost is not the will of Satan.

IV.v.223-224: Ophelia prays that, at the end of each person's life (ironically, this prayer is for herself), God be with him or her and that God may protect one from evil and lead each person into heaven.

V.ii.8-14: What a great set of lines here: "When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us, There's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will." It is fantastic in its direct reference to the Lord's Prayer: "Thy [God's] will be done, on earth as it is heaven." Students may debate about how much control man has over his own life and what forces lie outside of his control.

V.ii.231-238: Again, another set of lines which reinforce man's free will vs. a predetermined destiny: "We defy augury. There is a special providence in the fall of a sparrow." This is a direct reference to Matthew 10.29-31, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father?...Fear ye not, therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." This biblical allusion teaches Christians they are never alone in life; God is omni-present. Augury, an archaic practice, is the skill of divining or prognosticating the future from the flight of birds, derived from the Latin "avis" and "gar" (bird + to talk).⁴⁹

Humans as Dust

II.ii.327-334: Hamlet contemplates the authenticity of the creation of man, "What a piece of work is man...and yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust?" In ancient philosophy, a fifth substance in addition to the four elements (earth, air, fire, water) was thought to compose heavenly bodies - this fifth element pervades all things.⁵⁰ Hamlet questions humans as dust or humans as heavenly beings on earth, with the presumption that we are heavenly beings on earth since the Holy Spirit lives inside each human frame. And yet, if we are so

divinely made, why do we err?

IV.ii.6: In response to the question of where Hamlet has stored Polonius' body, Hamlet tells Rosencrantz that Polonius' body has returned to the earth in dust form. Intended for comic effect, this is a direct reference to Genesis 3.19, "for thou art dust, and unto dust shalt thou return."

Jephthah's Daughter

II.ii.427-432: With the intention of being funny rather than serious, Hamlet pokes fun at Polonius, whom he sees as similar to Jephthah, because both men sacrificed their daughters for inane reasons. Polonius has a "treasure" that will be thrown away for no good reason, i.e., Ophelia will be sacrificed (she commits suicide in a future Act) for no good reason.

Seven Deadly Sins

III.i.64-98: Hamlet's soliloquy contemplates suicide, which is a grave transgression against God's will. By committing hubris, or excessive pride, man reveals himself as the sole ruler of himself, thus not humbling himself to God's will.

Seven Holy Sacraments

III.i.131-132: If Ophelia was not intended for the sacrament of marriage with Hamlet, then she might as well get herself to a convent, as a nun performing the sacrament of Holy Orders. Students should take note of the *double entendre*: nunnery also meant brothel during this time.

IV.vii.144-145: If Laertes cuts Hamlet's throat in the church, i.e. murders him in the church, King Claudius is afraid that such a holy place would sanctify the murder. Thus, if Hamlet, in a church, were to be performing the sacrament of reconciliation at the time Laertes murdered him, Hamlet could technically go to heaven because of his part in the sacrament of Last Rites. This is a direct juxtaposition of circumstances from the earlier scene of Claudius kneeling in penance.

7 Deadly Sins, 7 Holy Sacraments, Nicene Creed, Cain & Abel, 10 Commandments, Judgment Day

III.iii.40-84: Claudius attempts the sacrament of reconciliation as he kneels in prayer. He asks God for forgiveness, yet knows he does not merit it, since he cannot commit to penance for his crime. His prayers are empty: while he may repent breaking the sixth commandment by murdering his brother (a direct reference to Cain & Abel), he refuses to perform any penance for it because of his pride (a Deadly Sin). Upon seeing Claudius in prayer, begging for mercy, Hamlet exhibits mercy to Claudius because he is afraid that since Claudius is in reconciliation, Hamlet cannot instantly kill him. Otherwise Claudius, upon confessing any last sins to God (Last Rites), would go to heaven after death. Students should remember the promise of the New Testament, as outlined in the Nicene Creed, that since Jesus died for our sins, God bestows mercy on us for our sins, and we are thus promised the hope of salvation. Hamlet decides not to murder Claudius at this time, but instead chooses to do so in a later, less holy setting. There is much to discuss in this scene.

V.i.1-272: The graveyard scene, another weighty part of the play, touching on the issues of the Holy Sacraments (Ophelia not receiving Last Rites therefore absolving her entrance into heaven); the Nicene Creed and Judgment Day ("He will come again to judge the living and the dead"); Cain and Abel (Adam, the father of Cain and Abel, was a grave digger since he buried his son Abel, therefore giving credibility to the profession); the Ten Commandments ("thou shalt not murder"); and Pride as a Deadly Sin (Ophelia committing suicide,

therefore waiving any rights to a Christian burial). This scene should provoke engaging comments from the students.

Wickedness

III.iii.85: Hamlet alludes to the passage in Ezekiel 16:49, which explains how wickedness, i.e. committing any of the seven deadly sins on a regular basis, will lead to one's demise, in this case, King Claudius's demise, as he has committed pride, envy, and lust in transgression against the late King Hamlet.

Discussion

Students will need to answer these questions, as well as any others included by the teacher: How does religion affect the play? Cite specific examples of its effects on the characters, scenes, customs, rules, mindsets. What would the play look like without elements of religion? Cite specific religious scenes in the play, then speculate how the scene would unfold if religion were absent. What is the importance of religion? Cite specific examples from current religious beliefs in the world. Compare and contrast religion's importance between 16th C England and 21st C America. Cite specific examples that define religious importance within each time period. Is religion necessary to govern society? Cite specific examples where it is and is not necessary. How has religious influence changed over the years? Cite specific example of religious potency throughout history from the 16th C to the 21st C.

Analysis

Students build claim, evidence, and commentary arguments.

Composition

Students write persuasive/expository papers.

Students write compare/contrast papers.

Strategies

Strategies While Teaching About Religion

"Concept/Question Chart": 2 parts to a Chalkboard: Students will identify the religious concept being alluded to within the text, e.g. the Ten Commandments, Judgment Day, or a Sacrament, and write this concept on the left side of the board. On the right side of the board, students will pose any lingering questions about this concept, as well as formulate higher-level thinking questions inspired by it, and have these questions answered by their peers.

Strategies While Teaching About the History of Religion

"Text-Text; Text-Self; Text-World Connections": Students write down these three associations in their spiral, leaving a blank space after and underneath each. As they learn about the different topics in Christian religious history, students will take each topic and make a text-to-text connection, then make a text-to-self connection,

and finally make a text-to-world connection. For example, for the Ten Commandments, I would write: "The Ten Commandments can also be found in Religious Dogma or Christian Catechism" (connecting the text to another text). "The Ten Commandments can be found in my life when I obey my Mom and Dad" (connecting the text to the self). "The Ten Commandments can also be found in Hollywood headlines because one should not commit adultery" (connecting the text to a world issue).

Strategies While Reading the Text Through a Religious Lens

"Think-Pair-Share": Independently, student will read a brief passage from the play that has a religious allusion in it and identify the line of text that contains it. In pairs, students will show their partner their line of text and discuss what religious concept is alluded to in the line of text. As a class, students will share their answers with their peers, ideally so that the class arrives at homogeneous answers about the specific line of text.

"Evidence/Application Chart": 2 parts to a chalkboard: As students read the text through a religious perspective, on the left side of the board they will write the line of text as evidence that supports the concept taught. On the right side of the board is where they apply what they have learned: students must bring in present-day examples of people in society living out the religious concepts, e.g., newspaper articles, magazine pictures, advertisements, etc.

Strategies for Discussion

"Socratic Seminar Circle": Students are to sit side by side, forming a circle in the classroom. Place one student at the board. Elect a discussion leader. When a student has a question, he or she may raise a hand and, after being handed the tennis ball by the discussion leader, he or she may pose the question to the entire group. A student can only be called on by the discussion leader, and he or she can only speak or respond to a question by holding the tennis ball. The question is to be answered in full by the other students, with the discussion leader deciding when a question is stale. As the questions are answered, the student at the board must write down the specific examples provided as evidence for each answer. Please note: in order for this Socratic Seminar to be effective, there are three general rules: A student may speak only when holding the tennis ball, each classmate must speak at least once, and the teacher neither speaks nor participates in the discussion.

Strategies for Analysis

"Claim-Evidence-Commentary" Paragraphs: Students will need to practice making a one-sentence claim, providing one sentence of evidence for this claim, and offering two to three sentences of commentary about it. As they look at initial teacher examples, students will be better able to make Claim-Evidence-Commentary pieces of their own. For example, one can make a claim that in Act III, Scene iii, L 40-42 ("O, my offense is rank, it smells to heaven; It hath the primal eldest curse upon 't, A brother's murder"), Shakespeare makes an allusion to the murder of Cain and Abel in Claudius' speech, as evidenced by the story of Cain and Abel in Gn 4:10-12. King Claudius realizes that he offends God by breaking one of the Ten Commandments in killing his brother Hamlet. King Claudius recognizes that he is like Cain, jealous of his brother Abel, and that this is obviously not a Christian way to live.

Strategies for Composition

"Claim-Evidence-Commentary" Paper: Students should take one religious concept taught and find three to five examples alluding to it throughout the text. Each example is fortified within a claim, evidence, commentary paragraph (see above). Include an introductory paragraph that establishes the controlling argument and a

concluding paragraph summarizing all the main points made within the paper. Students are ready to compose an actual essay.

"Compare/Contrast" Paper: Students should compare the importance of religion in 16th C England to the importance of religion in the 21st C. Students are to make three claims about religious potency in the 16th C, as well as three contrasting or comparison claims about religious influence in the 21st C. Each paragraph must produce a claim, backed up by valid, accurate, cited evidence, and accompanied by commentary (see two strategies above). Include an introductory paragraph that establishes the controlling argument and a concluding paragraph summarizing all the main points made within the paper. Students are ready to compose an actual essay.

Activities

In-Class Writing: As the teacher instructs students on religion, the teacher should remember that these religious concepts and religious history are sensitive matters. Students should be encouraged to keep a personal journal, recording the textual information on one side of the page, and personal reaction on the other side of the page. This will help to keep students' voices heard, at least on paper, before they are ready to express their opinions more openly in discussion format later on. Aim for ten minutes of journal writing to be incorporated into each class during this period in the unit.

Character Analysis: At certain points during the re-reading of the play through a religious lens, teachers may choose to do an activity that penetrates into the mind of the character, Hamlet. Because he is the central character, he is a good subject for the question of religious dependence. This activity is called "Fishbowl": A student volunteers to be Hamlet and sits in a chair located in the middle of a classroom circle. This seat is the hot seat: students in this seat, while pretending to be Hamlet, must take turns answering questions from their peers directed toward this fictional Hamlet. This allows students to get inside the mind of Hamlet by creating answers to the reasons why Hamlet acts the way he does (religiously motivated or not). This activity can also be extended by introducing hot seats for other major characters from the play.

Societal Analysis: This is an activity for the latter part of the unit, occurring after the initial discussion but before the analysis segments. The teacher must introduce the concept that people during Shakespeare's time had a familiar intimacy with religion: they depended on it quite a bit and religion did indeed affect their decisions regarding daily struggles. Once the claim is presented, the societal analysis question must follow: Is this still the case today? Instruct the students to perform a bit of research, citing religious influence in specific contemporary examples, e.g., human cloning, divorce rates, assisted suicide, death penalty, abortion, in-vitro fertilization, stem-cell research, common oaths: "Oh my God!", "Jesus Christ", or "Holy Shit."

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