

Intertextuality and the context of reception: *Hamlet* – Act 3 scene 4 by William Shakespeare

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Lesson plan

Resources

- ❖ Copies of *Hamlet* texts
- ❖ (Optional) *Hamlet* film eg. DVD or David Tennant version is available on youtube
- ❖ **Resource A** – Extract from *Hamlet* Act 3 Scene 4
- ❖ **Resource B** – Bible verse cards (one set per student – best cut up and put in an envelope)
- ❖ **Resource C** - *Hamlet* Act 3 Scene 4 film clip

Learning objectives

- ❖ To study the presentation of the conflict in *Hamlet* Act 3 Scene 4 (the closet scene)
- ❖ To consider Shakespeare's use of biblical reference

Starter activity – recapping *Hamlet's* mission and making predictions

- ❖ Recap the Ghost's instructions to Hamlet in Act One Scene 5:
 - 'Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.'
 - 'Let not the royal bed of Denmark be
A couch for luxury and damned incest.
But, howsoever thou pursuest this act,
Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive
Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven
And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,
To prick and sting her.'
- ❖ Discuss:
 - How successful has Hamlet been so far? (i.e. not completed either part of mission - wasted time pretending to be mad, plotted a way to check the Ghost's words, missed opportunity to kill Claudius, etc.)
 - Hamlet has been called to speak to his mother – what does he want to say to her? (especially

now he has extra reason for believing the Ghost's commands)

- How might he 'leave her to heaven' and encourage her conscience to 'prick and sting her'?
- Make predictions and perhaps role-play conversation between Hamlet and Gertrude
 - What persuasive methods might he use to convince her to turn against Claudius?

Introduction – reading

- ❖ Read Act Three Scene Four or watch it and follow along in books (if you want to avoid getting waylaid with the Oedipus complex, perhaps avoid the Branagh version!)
 - Consider: What methods does Hamlet use to try to convince his mother of the error of her ways?
 - Find examples and feedback ideas. (E.g. confrontation, violence, visual aids, shock tactics, pleas, etc.)
 - How successful is he? (This is debatable – she does ask Hamlet for advice about what to do, but she is also convinced he is mad because of his reaction to the Ghost; in the next scene she does seem to help cover up Hamlet's murder of Polonius. Perhaps recap the controversial nature of ghosts in Elizabethan times, and speculate why Hamlet can see the Ghost but Gertrude can't – is Hamlet imagining things, or is Gertrude too 'tainted'?)

Main activity 1 – matching the biblical allusions (paired card sort)

- ❖ Explain that one persuasive method Hamlet employs with his mother is the use of biblical references. Consider:
 - Why might that be a powerful tool to convince his mother (and the Elizabethan audience) that Hamlet is in the right?

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- Why would this encourage her conscience to 'prick and sting her'?
- ❖ Complete the following activities:
 - Using the scene extracts [**Resource A**] students highlight/underline wherever they think Hamlet is alluding to the Bible (could be done in pairs)
 - Then read the Bible verse cards [**Resource B**] and students try to match the cards to the correct place on the scene
 - Watch the film clip [**Resource C**] to check answers
 - How many of these references had we already spotted?
 - How many of these surprise us?

Main activity 2 – close analysis group work and discussion

- ❖ How do these biblical references impact our understanding of the scene? (E.g. Some, such as the 'ears of corn' allusion, make the text take on a new layer of meaning; some make Hamlet sound more powerful/justified.)
 - Teacher models annotating the impact of the biblical references (e.g. for the first example, Hamlet says 'your husband's brother's wife' to show that the marriage goes against a biblical law – he presents the marriage as evil and offensive.)
 - Students continue annotation in groups
 - Feed back ideas
- ❖ Discuss and make notes:
 - How do these biblical references change the nature of the debate between Hamlet and Gertrude? (Hamlet has the moral high ground – by quoting the Bible he shows that he has God on his side; he even suggests that he is on a divinely-ordained mission.)
 - How important/successful are the biblical allusions in Hamlet's

convincing Gertrude to see things from his point of view, and to end her physical relationship with Claudius?

- In Act 3, Hamlet appears a bit of a failure – he misses the opportunity to kill Claudius, he accidentally kills Polonius, he fails to get his mother fully on side. Does his use of biblical reference change the audience's view of Hamlet at all?
 - Do the biblical allusions justify Hamlet/mitigate his errors? (Perhaps reflect that Claudius also uses much religious imagery and biblical reference in the previous scene, but does this make him more sympathetic to the audience or simply highlight his hypocrisy?)

Plenary – reflections

- ❖ What has this lesson revealed about Shakespeare's use of biblical allusion?
 - For what purposes and effects does he have the characters reference the Bible?

Homework

- ❖ This could be some close analysis writing of the relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude in this scene, with a focus on Hamlet's attempts to persuade her.
- ❖ Or a research task using the Cross Reference website to discover more about Shakespeare's use of biblical allusion.

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Resources

Resource A - *Hamlet Act 3, Scene 4*

The Queen's closet.

[Enter HAMLET]

HAMLET

Now, mother, what's the matter?

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended

HAMLET

Mother, you have my father much offended. ...

QUEEN GERTRUDE

Have you forgot me?

HAMLET

No, by the rood, not so:

You are the queen, your husband's brother's wife;

And--would it were not so!--you are my mother. ...

Leave wringing of your hands: peace! sit you down,

And let me wring your heart; for so I shall,

If it be made of penetrable stuff, ...

Look here, upon this picture, and on this,

The counterfeit presentment of two brothers. ...

This was your husband. Look you now, what follows:

Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear,

Blasting his wholesome brother. ...

What devil was't

That thus hath cozen'd you at hoodman-blind?...

O shame! where is thy blush? ...

QUEEN GERTRUDE

O Hamlet, speak no more:

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;

And there I see such black and grained spots

As will not leave their tinct. ...

... Whereon do you look?

[Enter Ghost]

HAMLET

On him, on him! Look you, how pale he glares!

His form and cause conjoin'd, preaching to stones,

Would make them capable. ...

Do you see nothing there?

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QUEEN GERTRUDE

Nothing at all; yet all that is I see. ...
This the very coinage of your brain:
This bodiless creation ecstasy
Is very cunning in.

HAMLET

Ecstasy! ... Mother, for love of grace,
Lay not that mattering unction to your soul,
That not your trespass, but my madness speaks:
... Confess yourself to heaven;
Repent what's past; avoid what is to come;

QUEEN GERTRUDE

O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.

HAMLET

O, throw away the worsè part of it,
And live the purer with the other half.
Good night: but go not to mine uncle's bed;
Assume a virtue, if you have it not. ...
And either cast the devil, or throw him out
With wondrous potency.
Once more, good night:
And when you are desirous to be bless'd,
I'll blessing beg of you. For this same lord,
[Pointing to POLONIUS]
I do repent: but heaven hath pleased it so,
To punish me with this and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.
I will bestow him, and will answer well
The death I gave him. So, again, good night.
I must be cruel, only to be kind:
Thus bad begins and worse remains behind.
[Exeunt severally; HAMLET dragging POLONIUS]

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Resource B

1. Leviticus 20:21 ²¹And if a man shall take his brother's wife, it is an unclean thing: he hath uncovered his brother's nakedness; they shall be childless.

2. Joel 2:13 ¹³Rend your heart and not your garments.

3. Genesis 41: 5-7 ⁵And he slept and dreamed the second time: and, behold, seven ears of corn came up upon one stalk, rank and good. ⁶And, behold, seven thin ears and blasted with the east wind sprung up after them. ⁷And the seven thin ears devoured the seven rank and full ears.

4. 1 Corinthians 15:55 ⁵⁵O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

5. Luke 19:40 ⁴⁰And [Jesus] answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out.

6. Mark 3:14-15 ¹⁴And he ordained twelve, that they should ... have power ... to cast out devils:

7. Romans 13:4 ⁴for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.

Resource C – <http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/467/Hamlet-~Act-3,-scene-4>