

Mythological Approach to Hamlet

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Shakespeare's Hamlet has been one of the most criticized works of literature for several centuries and remains one of the most reviewed plays today. Mythological and Biblical undertones play an infinite role in the character of the main protagonist Hamlet. The young prince of Denmark compares many people in his life to mythological and biblical figures to conclude his intellect and perhaps madness are portrayed through these allusions.

Mythological Allusions: Throughout the play Hamlet uses continuously allusions to express his thoughts and feelings towards the people around him. After Queen Gertrude remarriage. Prince Hamlet makes his feelings for his mother very clear, when he compares the late king Hamlet to his stepfather Claudius. Hamlet tells, his mother,

“So excellent a king, that was to this, Hyperion to a Satyr, So, loving to my mother.”

This simile shows Hamlet's high regards for his deceased father as well as his extreme loathing for Claudius, his father's brother, and murderer. Allingham puts it perfectly when he writes, “Hamlet compares his deceased father to Hyperion, the Green Sun God, and the usurping Claudius to a Satyr, a Greek mythic amalgam of man and Goat.” This comparison shows Hamlet's true feeling for Claudius since Satyrs are often associated with lustful tendencies and drunkenness. Also comparing his father to Hyperion shows, “Hamlet does not just connect his father to a titan, but also the source of light with that hope of happiness.”

Next mythological allusion has been used in the Nemean Lion in Act I scene IV. This mythical animal in the valley of Nemea in Argolis was slain by Hercules with his own hand. Hercules is the most famous hero of classical antiquity known for his great physical strength and vigor. Here when Hamlet comes to know about the presence of ghost Hamlet says that his fate has given him the call which fills his nerves and munches with the strength of the Nemean Lion to act and follow the ghost.

The next mythological example is in the following line when ghost comes before Hamlet, the ghost speaks before him -

“I find thee apt.
And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed,
That roots itself in ease and Lethe wharf.”

The ghost says that he finds Hamlet ready and active. And if he is not deeply moved, he would consider him duller than the weed that grows on the bank of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in the lower region.

Lethe is the river of forgetfulness in the lower world according to Greek mythology; a soul has to take dip in the Lethe River before entering human body so that he may not remember the incidents of previous birth. Therefore, after telling the reason of his murder, the ghost says that if Hamlet is not moved after knowing the reality of his father's murder, he is no better than the fat and dull weed in the Lethe River.

When Hamlet does not consider the ghost a holy soul and he comes under doubt, Hamlet considers the ghost associated with St. Patrick and not the devil.

O Jephthah..... judge of Israel (Act II, Scene II)

Jephthah is one of the twelve judges of Israel, on coming back from his victory over the Ammonites, first saw his daughter and had to sacrifice her to keep his vow. In the same way Polonius sacrifices his daughter, or it will be proper to say that he puts his daughter on an oath she should not meet Hamlet.

Hamlet says, “One speech in it I chiefly loved. It was Aeneas' tale to Dido: and there about of it specially where he speaks of Priam's slaughter: If live in your memory, begin.....”

Here Hamlet teaches the players how to speak on the stage. He says that one speech in which Aeneas describes the Trojan War to Dido, queen of Carthage. Dido fell in love with Aeneas and showed disloyalty to his father. But when he left her and returned to his country, she committed suicide. This speech has been uttered to show Gertrude the result of disloyalty, for Gertrude has been disloyal to her husband.

“The rugged Pyrrhus, like the Hyrcanian beast.” Further Aeneas describes how Priam was killed by Pyrrhus, here Pyrrhus is the son of Aeschylus and Hyrcanus tiger which is the symbol of deadliest ferocity. This speech shows the force of revenge because the person who does wrong, ultimately gets his death in the same way.

It is the part of a soliloquy uttered by Hamlet in Act III scene II. When Hamlet goes to meet his mother. This speech is just after the departure of Polonius -

“O heart, lose not thy nature: let not ever
The soul of Nero enter this firm bosom
Let me be cruel, not unnatural,
.....”

Here Hamlet decides to be strict but not unnatural. Nero was

a Roman emperor who murdered his Mother Agrippina in the most brutal manner. He wants that soul of Nero should enter his heart, but he does not want to be unnatural.

When Hamlet kills Polonius unknowingly the king decides to send Hamlet to England and shows himself well - wisher of Hamlet. At this occasion Hamlet says -

“I see a Cherub that sees them.”

Here Shakespeare has employed the word Cherub, which was first used by John Milton for the angels who were expelled out by God.

When Laertes in suffering from the pain of his father’s murder, the king avails himself the opportunity the king says:

“Good Laertes,

If you desire to know the certainty of your father’s death.....” Laertes replies, ”
To his good friends thus I will open arms:

And, like the kind life rendering pelican Repast them with my blood. ”

Here kindhearted Pelican is believed to nourish its young once on its life blood. A Pelican allows its young once to take fish out of its pouch.

In Act V, scene I Horatio and Hamlet are wonder stricken when they see the king, the queen and other courtiers following a dead body. This is the dead body of Ophelia.

Funeral ceremony of Ophelia is full of mythological description. The first priest says,

“Her obsequies have been as far enlarged

As we have warranties: her death was doubtful: And, but that great command over ways the order She should in ground unsanctified have lodged Till the last trumpet for charitable prayers.

Shards, flints and pebbles should be thrown on her: Yet here she is allowed her virgin crants.

Her maiden strewments and the bringing home of bell and burial. ”

That they have performed all the funeral rites that are permissible. It is known that her death is doubtful. The king over - rules the authority of the church about her mode of burial. She would have been buried in unconsecrated ground to remain there till the lost trumpet announcing the judgement day. Instead of prayers sung for rest and peace to her soul, stones and pebbles would have been thrown at her dead body. But by the orders of the king, she has been granted the honor usually granted to a maiden in her burial.

This is the reason why wreaths have been hung in her memory in the church, and flowers strewn on her grave. The marriage rites in the case of maidens are sadly parodied in

the funeral rites. These rites are part and parcel of mythological studies.

In Act V scene I, a biblican reference has been given very skillfully, when Hamlet speaks on hearing the dialogues of the clowns.

“That skull had a tongue in it and could seeing once; how the knave jowls it to the ground, as if it were Cain’s jawbone, that did the first murder? It might be the fate of the politician which this ass now overreaches, one that would circumvent God; might it not?”

Here Jawbone of Cain, who according to the Bible, had killed his brother Abel. His was the first murder committed by man.

To conclude, we can say that Shakespeare has instilled a large amount of mythological essence in the play Hamlet. For Hamlet in his madness, whether feigned or genuine, speaks the language of scholars and learned person. Every speech of the Hamlet exhibits some mythological aspects. Therefore, there is no limit of mythological depth where a person may plunge into.