

THEOLOGY AND ENGLISH LITERATURE: FROM CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE TO ALEXANDER POPE

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ABSTRACT

Generally, it is not obvious to people that theology has contributed a lot in the formation of English literature. So, this paper tries to picture and convince how the writings of English Literature writers have impacts and influences in themselves from the biblical theology. Writers like William Shakespeare uses the theology of grace in his play *All's Well that's End Well*. John Milton pens theology of Freedom of Choice. John Donne writes Trinitarian Theology. Christopher Marlowe shows the theology of Doctor Faustus, which shines under the title like purgatory the highest junction. Alexander Pope reflects the theology of participation in self Salvation and shows theodicy in his work. Theology and English literature go together. They are inseparable. Theology is interwoven in English Literature. It appears convincingly that William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Donne, Christopher Marlowe, and Alexander Pope have sufficiently left grains in their writings which compel to justify the significance of theology in English Literature. Thus, a high degree of significance the biblical theology immerses within the arena of English Literature which may be taught to the English literature readers with a well stuff of biblical theology which is very much beneficial for the understanding of English literature knower.

Key Words: *theology of grace, theology of Freedom of Choice, Trinitarian Theology, purgatory, theology of participation, self salvation.*

INTRODUCTION

Literature is often considered antithetical to religion. It is a common view that since the times of Renaissance in the Western world, literature and literary works have been constantly limiting, if not altogether replacing the use and function of scripture. There has been constructed a wall between religion and secularizing tendency in all societies and cultures. For instance, it has been argued that in England Shakespeare was writing English Literature and not biblical literature. That is why Peter Marshall stresses that there was an absence of religious declarations in Shakespeare's works ([Marshall, 2015](#)). For him and many other scholars-Shakespeare's plays are secular ([Thiher, 2009](#)). They say that religion is a dogmatic and doctrinal but literature is open-ended and liberal. But then there are instances such as the following, which compel us to rethink the above view. They show that the writers themselves were far more sensitive to the issue of religion and doctrinal issues than many of their admirers and scholars would like to see:

LAFEU: They say miracles are past; and we have our
philosophical persons, to make modern and familiar,
things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that
we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves
into seeming knowledge, when we should submit
ourselves to an unknown fear. (*All's Well That Ends Well* 2.3)

This paper deals with the idea of Theology and English literature, in this paper, there is discussion how William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Donne, Christopher Marlowe, and [Alexander Pope](#) have interwoven biblical theology in their writings. As mentioned earlier, though there is religion vs. secularization debate going on in the Western culture and scholarship, it has to be recognized that in the literary works of all the above-mentioned writers, theology is not fore grounded but provides the philosophical and ethical frame work. Theology and its role cannot be ignored in the formation of the English Literature. It ought to be given its due weight age and value because at present scholars have become interested in finding the biblical references and concepts in Shakespeare's plays for the importance of theology which has contributed unavoidable dimension for the development of the English literature ([Shaheen, 2011](#)). As a result, while reading English literature, readers may also peep into the biblical literature to understand the significance of biblical theology that has helped the greatest dramatist and poets of the world to create plays and make them the vehicle of expression for the improvement of the world humanity. This is why this paper needs to be presented before the listeners for doing the justice to the idea of theology in English Literature.

William Shakespeare lights up the theology of grace in his play *All's Well That's End Well*. John Milton shows theology of Freedom of Choice. John Donne beams Trinitarian Theology. Christopher Marlowe focuses the theology of Doctor Faustus, which glimmers under the title like purgatory the highest junction. [Alexander Pope](#) reflects the theology of participation in self Salvation and shows theodicy in his work.

The above details have been critically and academically discussed so that the idea of theology and English literature can convince the hearers and the readers that this writing hits the topic properly and convincingly being presented by the presenter.

I. CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE (1564-93)

The Theology of Doctor Faustus

In the case of Christopher Marlowe if one asks for the presence of the theology in his work, it is only to defame him as all the Elizabethan and Jacobean writers are replete with theology in their works (Hass, Jasper, & Jay, 2007).

“The theology of Doctor Faustus by Christopher Marlowe is messy, ambiguous, and often contradictory.” It, of course, must be like that as Elizabethan theology is “a messy affair” at that time. ([Poole, 2006, p.101](#)) In regard to theology, the English keep on “lurching forward and backward, right to left, in uneven and unsteady paces.” Reason, in medieval theology, asserts “purgatory” which is a place where souls are tortured, to be free from there, help of prayer can be a proper medium which can “reduce” the anguish of soul from its residual sins. Thanks to God from monks, for purgatory becomes a good source of ransom, they exploit “purgatorial” system to the extreme corruption, people are compelled to pay huge sums of money for the release of the soul of the relative or dead, the rich could pay more and more money to get their sins minimized by pope and clergy through prayers, it is here they will be provided certificates for the clearance of their sins. Ambiguity on this purgatorial theology raises a number of questions. ([Poole, 96](#))

Purgatory the highest junction

Why is this purgatory the highest junction to send the souls of the congregants to heaven? Why do people pay big amounts to pope and clergy for the release either of their beloveds or of their own while living to lessen their residual sins? Answer, simply, can be offered; it is the medieval theology responsible to prevail in the faith of the congregants that after death, there is also a life hereafter that starts in heaven, to reach there, salvation is inevitable. Therefore, it is in this understanding that this religious practice fattens on the dogma of purgatory, ironically, pope and clergy will pray more and more to purify the soul from all its remaining sins. Questions do not finish only at this much point, pope and clergy become the intermediary for getting the people salvaged ([Poole, 98](#)).

Horse-Courser: Alas, alas ‘Doctor’ Faustain, quotha Mass, Doctor Lopus was never such a doctor. H’as given me a purgation, h’as purged me of forty dollars (Act 4.I.lines 132-135)

But I’ll seek out my doctor and have my forty dollars again or I’ll make it the dearest horse (Act 4.I.lines. 141-42). ([Bevington, Rasmussen, 1998, p. 172](#)) The above lines show that there is a nice deal of theology of purgatory. Marlow uses biblical theology in his play to enrich his English literary play. Once again it cannot be belied that biblical theology is the foundation for the expression of the English literature writers. In fact, in no way, they can escape of theological ideas.

II. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (1564–1616)

Though Scholar like Richard Louis Levin, his study (as cited in [Hamlin, 2013](#)), a Professor of English Emeritus at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, rejects any biblical idea in the material used in Shakespeare’s plays. This rejection occurs definitely only the way Levin tries to see the material Shakespeare has used in his own work. So, when one tries to see Shakespearean work from the eye of Levin, reader will be convinced fully what perspective Levin wants to layer out in Shakespearean Literature with. Nevertheless, it is only one thing and one understanding with one layer dug out in Shakespearean work by Levin. But, when further a layer of theology and English Literature is sought out, Scholars’ perspective in regard to theology and English literature becomes visible to the point of convincing that yes theology is found in English literature. It has been rightly said in the study of [Thomas Healy \(as cited in Hass, Jasper, & Jay, 2007, p. 382\)](#) that “theology infuses the plays of Shakespeare.”

With this idea, the researcher is trying to show how scholars have struggled to establish a new perspective that is there is biblical theology in English literature. Scholars like [David N. Beauregard](#) tries to dig out theology of grace in Shakespeare’s work in the play *All's Well That's Ends Well*. [E.M.W. Tillyard](#) views “Helena and Bertram as the representatives of heavenly grace.” ([Beauregard, 2008, p. 40](#)) Not only Tillyard, even, Robert G. Hunter sees Helena as the instrument of God’s grace. Beauregard argues that Shakespeare was well versed in theology in *All’s Well That Ends Well*. In the play Helena works as

miracle worker and pilgrim, speaks in theological language. She represents theology through divine grace and human efforts. Through inspired merit she proposes to cure, cureless king within two days which is a miraculous thing as it is beyond a professional skill. She admits before LaFew and Parolles “Heaven hath through me restored the King to health” (2.3.64). She is raised in title and rewarded being married to Bertram. Shakespeare makes Helena mediation for getting miracle of healing performed. Later, she also applies mediation of St. James for her prayer to be fulfilled to get her husband back. (45)

There is an example of the biblical literature in the Shakespearean literature in King Richard II in which

DUCHESS OF YORK says:-

His prayers are full of false hypocrisy;
Ours of true zeal and deep integrity.
Our prayers do out-pray his; then let them have
That mercy which true prayer ought to have. (5.3.107-10)

This passage echoes the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican who go to temple to pray (Luke 18.10-14). In it, a reader finds that passage shows the request of the requester to get mercy which true prayers have, indicates Luke 18:13- O God, be merciful to me a sinner, moreover, the prayer of the Pharisee-O God, I thanke thee that I am not as other men, is full of false hypocrisy. Jesus says that publican’s request in prayer granted in contrast to Pharisee. Likewise, Duchess says that their prayers do out pray his. Though the context of the parable of Jesus differs enough from Shakespeare’s, the point of the parable is humility versus haughtiness, a spirit of contrition rather than self-righteousness (Shaheen, 1999). The point which presenter wants to hold here is this that the biblical and the Shakespearean English literary words or sentences may differ in their setting and structure, Jesus and Shakespeare’s contexts may differ as far as the concern of words and sentences is there but the main thing which is in common is the spirit which is common. This common spirit is the biblical essence and this biblical essence is heavenly humility which is found in Publican and Jesus not only recognizes it but also sanctions it. It may be said that this humility is heavenly or the trait of God Himself which is found in Jesus as Jesus is in God and God is in Jesus and when the same feature Jesus sees in Publican, Jesus points it heightens it. Likewise, Jesus humility Shakespeare also makes part of his genius which he put into the mouth of the Duchess of York through whom Shakespeare elevates biblical humility and the true and sincere and honest prayers and Shakespeare also sanctions them as Jesus. Both use humility but in their own way and according to their context. However, both Jesus and Shakespeare point out humility and it is here where the presenter wants to establish that theological humility is used by Shakespeare as a means of transportation for his character to express and teach the society of his time with biblical theological effect, formation and influence. Thus, the presenter wishes to bring forward the importance and significance of the biblical theology in English Literature.

III. John Milton (1608-1674)

John Milton is well known for his work for Paradise Lost possessing “*Theology of Freedom*.” There is enough deal on the theological terminology of freedom. How the first parents of humanity apply the freedom with their choice for which God had made them free to choose according to their will in their life, going away from God they apply their freedom to eat fruit with their wrong choice to fall in their life which becomes a very hot and intellectual debating attention for the world of the scholars who try to dig deeper and bring a better understanding for the humanity through the work of John Milton, the writer of the Paradise Lost (Myers, 2006, p.125).

Freedom of Choice

“Post-Reformation theology” gives importance to every choice as it is the necessary effect of the previous cause along with the subsequent denial in conjunction with “alternative possible choices (Benjamin Myers, 113).” Similarly, Duns Scotus defines “opposite” can happen at the time when a choice turns into an action in an event of a work (113). Claiming Arminian argument, Thomas Goad says that God has poised the system of doing and not doing to an action of a man in such an order that it lies in the will of the human being’s discretion whether an action be operated or given up (114). He can change the scale of choice for an action in, to be done or not to be done. Likewise, Simon Episcopus argues that human will is ‘uncaringly ready’ for opposites. In the view of the both scholars, it depends on the choice inclination whether it will go in favour of good or evil; choice can incline on the both pans of the scale. In consequence, in the Paradise Lost, it lies in the bending of the choice of Adam and Eve that they follow wrong as shown below:(114).

OF Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater Man

Restore us, and regain the blissful seat,

(*Paradise lost book I. 1-5*)

Adam and Eve disobey God who forbids them to eat the fruit of the knowledge but Satan makes their choice to taste it which brings death in the world. God sends them out of the Garden of Eden lest they should taste the fruit of the life (Genesis 3). Jesus then becomes the blissful seat to restore all humanity to God by His sacrifice and doing mercy over the sinners and thus bringing good out of evil ([Milton, *Paradise Lost Book I, Book I, XIX*](#)). In this paragraph also the presenter comprehends that this English literature work, also depends on the biblical theology of creation, disobedience, fall, punishment and then salvation through the grace of Christ Jesus. Though Dr. Samuel Jonson has commented and appreciated Milton and his work the *Paradise Lost* saying in design the *paradise lost* may claim the first place and in performance the second place among the production of human mind ([John Milton, Elijah Fenton, *Paradise Lost, XIX*](#)), he and his work must have been indebted to biblical theology. So, one can see that such a great work of English literature even comes from biblical literature which is full of biblical theology. Thus, again, biblical theology comes into its significance which paves the way of English literature poetry. So, even, here, one must understand the due importance of theology on how much it is flourishing which flourishes other discipline like English literature.

IV. JOHN DONNE (1572-1631)

“A Trinitarian theology” is the focal appearance in the “religious works of John Donne.” Even so, Christians having faith of orthodoxy in the “Trinity” in their spiritual existence is “monotheistic,” writes Karl Rahner. ([Nicholls, 1988, p. 50](#)) Moreover, he asserts, if “the Doctrine of the Trinity” is “abolished,” will make very little actual distinction in the theology of the majority of the Christians. Therefore, he ‘laments’ for the shocking impact on the spiritual incident and belief of Christians as Donne’s Trinitarian theology makes least impact on them due to their “orthodox profession of faith.” Donne’s Trinitarian theology is the “hub” from which all the Christian and churchly beliefs find their expression, “unity and coherence.”

Donne’s Trinitarian theology encompasses “political analogy and social image.” “The doctrines of creation, sin, incarnation, atonement, ecclesiology, as well as the sacramental and devotional life of the church, are held together by a conception of God as plurality in unity.” Donne says, “Monarchy is composed of monarchies.” He says that a king executes ‘rule and privilege, political responsibility and revolt, the duty and the accountability of a king, hierarchy, social justice, the relations of church and state in a Commonwealth center in a nation. This is what the same God Himself does. Donne is a “monarchist.” His mind is replete with the idea of monarchy to the extent where he finds in him divine authority. ([Nicholls, 45](#))

"All governments," he continued, "may justly represent God to me, who is the God of order, and fountain of all government, but yet I am more eased, and more accustomed to the contemplation of heaven... as heaven is a kingdom, by having been born and bred in a monarchy: God is a type of that, and that is a type of heaven" (S 4:240-41), ([Nicholls, 51](#)).

The researcher evolves in her mind that Donne frames a political analogy with that of the heaven in which God is a ruler having many sub institutions to carry out the work of the heaven, when it is in heaven that different heavenly organizations working properly in harmony above, it can be possible on the earth of England in which all by obeying to King assuming obeying to God can live in harmony. However, Donne has never been in favour of the king’s injustice, atrocity, and absoluteness. But as long as the king admits that He or she is the appointment of God, he/she can be an authority from God over His people. He sees trinity model of the working in heaven so on the earth also all the institutions of the world must work in collaboration to one another in The Trinity.

V. ALEXANDER POPE (1688-1744)

He writes different to what is written in the Bible. Surely, he also wants to create his Literature different from the Bible. Even then, he too will not be able to hide the Biblical Theological spirit from his works. No matter, even if it is satirical. He satirizes the creation of the Bible and brings back the universe into darkness.

Pope says that man has learnt about Nature and God's creation by using science; science has given man power but man intoxicated by this power, thinks that he is "imitating God". Pope uses the word "fool" to show how little he (man) knows in spite of the progress made by science.

On its publication, *An Essay on Man* receives great admiration throughout Europe. Voltaire calls it "the most beautiful, the most useful, the most sublime didactic poem ever written in any language". In 1756 Rousseau writes to Voltaire admiring the

poem and saying that it "softens my ills and brings me patience". Kant was fond of the poem and would recite long passages from it to his students. (["An Essay on Man," 2017, para. 3](#))

Often quoted is the following passage, the first verse paragraph of the second book, which neatly summarizes some of the theological, religious and humanistic tenets of the poem:

Know then thyself, presume not God to scan
The proper study of Mankind is Man.

Pope is not as concerned with the medieval theology as John Milton with "The Fall of Man" in conjunction with His "justice" in regard to "fate, fore-knowledge and free will." However, he goes to the root of all faith which is 'existent of God' in his own time. ([Pope, 2017, para 1, Neoclassical Era an Anthology of the Restoration, Augustan and Age of Sensibility-An Essay on Pope "Essay on Man" An analytical Overview, Web](#)) By doing this, he finds the reason of the salvation for the congregants; it is about the self "participation" of the people in their own "salvation." Medieval theology gives salvation through purgatory. But when the name of pope comes in this matter, human beings must participate in the matter of salvation for their own "salvation." ("The Poems of Alexander Pope" Edited by [John Butt, Methuen & Co. Ltd. 1963, web](#))

Pope is not as "clearly religious poet as Herbert, Hopkins, Donne, Tennyson and T. S. Eliot" are in their latter careers of their writings. (David Cody, Associate Professor of English, Hartwick College) What does it mean? It means that he is, indeed, not religious. However, if it is so, why does he find word "God" in his literary work?

In Pope's world, God exists and is what he centers the Universe around in order to have an ordered structure. And whenever, it destructures, pope knows that it is God Himself who restructures the world that is why He finds the word "God" with a purpose as explained below:

The Light himself shall shine
Reveal'd, and God's eternal day be thine!
The seas shall waste, the skies in smoke decay,
Rocks fall to dust, and mountains melt away;
But fix'd His word, His saving power remains;
Thy realm for ever lasts, thy own MESSIAH reigns!

CONCLUSION

From the above writing, an effort has been made by the researcher to show that theology and English literature go together. They are inseparable. Theology is interwoven in English Literature. It appears convincingly that William Shakespeare, John Milton, John Donne, Christopher Marlowe, and Alexander Pope have sufficiently left grains in their writings which compel to justify the significance of theology in English Literature. Thus, a high degree of significance the biblical theology immerses within the arena of English Literature which may be taught to the English literature readers with a well stuff of biblical theology which is very much beneficial for the understanding of English literature knower. The significance of biblical theology much more increases when one sees how English literature authors are unable to think, write, and express their contemporary issues of their societies without the touch and expression of the biblical literature.

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