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Teaching Shakespeare Within the Context of  
Christian Faith: A Case Study of **MACBETH**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The Christian faith has developed a Christian worldview which determines our beliefs, values, lifestyle and behaviour. The Bible states that without faith it is impossible to please God. (Heb. 11:6). The Christian's faith is therefore grounded in the word of God which is His revelation to us.

When God created man in His image, he was perfect, but as a test of his faith in Him, God said, "Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:16,17). God did not make man a robot. He had freedom of choice. He could obey God and live or disobey Him and die. And so it is that Adam in aspiring to be like God ate the fruit. This behaviour led to his fall with its resultant consequences of death.

But God did not abandon man for He had made him for a purpose--to praise and glorify Him and to love Him supremely. To this extent, even before man had sinned, God made provision for his redemption hinted at in Gen. 3:15 and made real in the incarnation. In John 1:1-3 and 14 we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth."

The Christian's worldview emerges from this passage. Christ is the centre and He is a revelation of God. He was with Him at the creation of the world, and had come to earth to fulfil His mission of being a role model for sinful man and to die for his redemption. In this passage of

Scripture we find the answer to all the fundamental questions of life: Who am I? Where I do come from and where am I going? In other words, what is man, his nature and his destiny. It is from this worldview that Adventist education takes its mandate-- “to restore in man the image of His maker.”<sup>1</sup>

Christian education is therefore unique in that it must prepare students for efficient and effective service in this life and “for the higher joy of wider service in the world to come.”<sup>2</sup> It must help students to respond to God’s gift of love, to have faith, and to trust in His saving grace.

The purpose of this essay is therefore to examine Macbeth, one of Shakespeare’s plays, to show the relationship between his worldview and Christian faith, and to use the insights gained to teach students moral and social values that will enhance acceptable behaviour in this life, and help them to live so that when their summons come to die, they can go peacefully to rest and await the trump of the Life-giver.

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Shakespeare’s dramatic heritage started in the Church. In medieval England the Mass was said in Latin, but most of the people did not understand because they could not read or write in any language. So the creative talent of some resourceful priests who were eager to convey the Christian evangel, resorted to the ancient religious strategy, and began to present ‘truth’ in drama.

The first attempts were simple pageants of the religious festivals—the birth of Jesus, the visit of the shepherds and of the wise men. During Passion Week, the trial and death of Jesus would be presented and the sound effect was a church choir which sang as the scenes were presented. These presentations drew large crowds to the church to see the acted stories and legends of their faith. Thus modern drama began as a technique in religious education.<sup>3</sup>

Before long, the simple pageants of Christmas and Easter developed more complicated

forms, and with the passing of time plays developed into three standard types: the mystery play--a portrayal of scriptural incident teaching Christian truth; the miracle play--an episode in the life of a saint; and the morality play--a play with a theme such as mercy, charity and forgiveness. The modern drama had its origins in the festivals of religion.

As these plays grew in popularity, the crowds that came to see them could no longer be accommodated in the church, so the location moved to the entrance of the church. The next stage, literally as well as metaphorically, came when someone had the idea of putting the platform on wheels to roll it away to some other location to play to a different audience.

In the same manner that the platform rolled away from the church, the plays moved away from their original purposes, and lost their sense of mission to the human spirit. The religious element declined and the secular ascended. This was due in part to the fact that tradesmen capitalized on these gathering so that the place no longer resembled a religious festivity, but rather a country fair. The plots of the plays were still Bible based, but cast in a secular mode.<sup>4</sup>

#### **WORLDVIEW DURING SHAKESPEARE'S TIME**

In Shakespeare's England religion played a vital role in the political and social life of the time. Henry VIII had broken the ties with the Catholic church, established the Church of England and instituted the divine right of Kings as head of the Church of England. His motive was not acceptable to most of his courtiers and other influential citizens because they did not share his ethical values of divorcing his wife because she could bear no children. This led to a fragmentation of the concept of the universal church, and may have been fuel for the ideas of Humanism characterized by its emphasis on human interests rather than on the natural world or religion. It also influenced the Reformation which addressed the abuses practised by the Catholic Church, and challenged its

monolithic authority. It also cannot be denied that during this period there was a growing faith in man's capacity to attain knowledge through reason, for Bacon had developed the logic of inductive and deductive reason which had its effect on spiritual revelation and the revealed truths of Christianity.

However, up to the time of Shakespeare, these ideas were not fully engrained in the society to affect literary thoughts, or maybe, Shakespeare, like Raleigh and several others maintained their own worldview and were not affected by the new ideas. Certain passages in Shakespeare have nonetheless been given dual or even multiple interpretations, example, Hamlet's encomium on man. "What a piece of work is man; how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties; in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god: the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals."

Hamlet, Act 11.ii. 307-311.

This passage has been taken as one of the great English versions of Renaissance humanism, an assertion of the dignity of man against the ascetism of medieval misanthropy. But Tillyard sees it as being in the purest medieval tradition: Shakespeare's version of the orthodox encomia of what man, created in the image of God was like in his prelapsarian state and of what ideally he is still capable of being (Compare Ps. 8:4-6).<sup>5</sup> It also shows Shakespeare placing man in the traditional cosmic setting between the angels and the beasts. However, Dr. Howse notes Hamlet's attitude towards earth which appears to him no other thing but "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" and "on the earth nothing so pathetic as man himself," the "paragon of animals," "the quintessence of dust."<sup>6</sup> The truth is, the ideas were not inoperative for they were embodied in the many conflicts inherent in the plays, but these conflicts and concepts are as old as man himself, and the plays when viewed

in their entirety, may be only reflecting the ‘drama of the ages.’

Regardless of the new ideas, the world picture which the Middle Ages inherited was still theocentric--that of an ordered universe arranged in a fixed system of hierarchies but modified by man's sin and the hope of redemption. Shakespeare's literary version of this order is given in Troilus and Cressida.

The heavens themselves, the planets, and this centre  
 Observe degree priority and place  
 Insisture course proportion season form  
 Office and custom, in all line of order;....  
 Oh, when degree is shak'd,  
 Which is the ladder to all high designs,  
 The enterprise is sick.

Act 1.iii. 85-88, 101-103.

On this same basis, Elizabethans were obsessed by the fear of chaos and the fact of mutability. To us chaos means hardly more than confusion on a large scale, but to the Elizabethan it meant the cosmic anarchy before creation and the wholesale dissolution that would result if the pressure of Providence relaxed and allowed the law of nature to cease functioning.<sup>7</sup> This concept of chaos was widespread in Elizabethan literature, and this concern is expressed in Shakespeare's treatment of human relationships at various levels. Following the Biblical record of sin, man unleashed chaos within the natural order as well as within himself when in disobedience he chose to be like God knowing good and evil. It should be noted that it is in the quest for knowledge that man sinned. Based on the above, we see the Elizabethans as being concerned with man, his nature and his destiny, and therefore subscribing to the Christian worldview of faith, and a belief in God's revelation through nature, and the Bible.

## SHAKESPEARE'S WORLDVIEW

Roland Frye in his book Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine states that there is documentary evidence that Shakespeare lived and died a conforming member of the Church of England. Both he and his children were baptized and buried in the faith.<sup>8</sup> This does not necessarily mean that his worldview was in total conformity to the Christian worldview. It is therefore important to examine his plays from which we can best deduce his philosophy of life and hence his beliefs and values.

It is evident that the concept of order in God's creation which was so engraved in the Elizabethan psyche was also part of Shakespeare's. He expresses belief in a God who stands sovereign over his creatures. Other themes include the sin of adultery, death and the judgement and afterlife which are well documented. This implies his unswerving belief in the commandments as the rule of faith, and a strong emphasis on moral values which very often is destructive to families and society alike.

Shakespeare demonstrates the duality in human nature, that is, his capacity for being good, and yet so prone to evil. He shows that man created in the image of God was perfect, but that his destiny is based on the choices he makes. The Christian values of love, integrity, respect, justice, forgiveness and mercy can all be extracted from the kinds of choices that are presented, the quality of insight that is revealed, the stature of the life that is being portrayed and the language that is used.

Roland Frye lists some 45 doctrines of the church that appear in Shakespeare's plays and notes that perhaps 25 fall under the classification of moral theology.<sup>9</sup> It is no wonder Samuel Johnson notes that Shakespeare's appeal rests upon his ability to portray human nature. It is his "mirror of life" that has stood the test of time.<sup>10</sup>

Other literary critics over the centuries have also expressed their feelings regarding

Shakespeare's worldview. G.W. Knight holds that Shakespeare's plays are essentially and pervasively, even blatantly Christian, and A.C. Bradley thinks that the constant presence of Christian beliefs confuse or even destroy the tragic impression of the plays. Shakespeare's intention, as a reading of his plays shows, is to hold up the "mirror to life" and show that if like Macbeth we do not repent, life "is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing." (Act v.v. 26-28). On the other hand, in The Tempest which is his last play, he points the way from justice to mercy and from mercy to forgiveness.

In his last Will and Testament Shakespeare wrote: "I commend my soul into the hands of God my Creator, hoping and assuredly believing, through the only merits of Jesus Christ my Saviour to be made a partaker of life everlasting." We need no further proof or testimony that Shakespeare was indeed rooted and grounded in the science of salvation, and that his plays can be read from that perspective.

#### **MACBETH**

#### **THE TEMPTATION AND FALL**

In traditional convention the King represents God on earth. In the play Macbeth we observe that the relationship between Macbeth and the king tends to parallel Lucifer and God. Both Lucifer and Macbeth hold high positions in the kingdom of their masters, but their ambition to be the King creates a conflict, so in the opening scene of the play we encounter the Witches, symbols of evil, and from their pronouncement: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Act 1.i.11) we know that we are in a world where values are reversed. This is manifested when Macbeth aspires to become king and against his better judgement, murders Duncan.

But we are told that Macbeth is a good man, and evidences to this effect are in the play. He

initially has no evil intentions and when the feelings of evil come to his mind, he is frightened.

In a soliloquy he says:

Why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth infix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs  
Against the use of nature?

Act 1.iii. 134-137

Before he commits the crime he also thinks of the life to come and the judgement, and to this extent, he vacillates. He could not make up his mind. Why then did he become such a monster? Lady Macbeth, a parallel of Eve, tempted her husband which led to his fall. She chastised him for behaving like a coward and being less than a man. So just as Eve persuaded Adam to seek knowledge and be wise, Lady Macbeth coerced Macbeth to seize the crown. He then decided he'd behave like a man, and committed the heinous crime. Man can be so good yet capable of such baseness. Like Lucifer, Macbeth rebelled against the king, the symbol of an ordered community.

Macbeth in murdering the king had violated several principles. The law says: "Thou shalt not kill" (Exodus 20:13). He had betrayed trust. Duncan was his kinsman who trusted him to the extent that he had gone to his house to show him gratitude for the seeming good he had done to him, and to honour him for his victory. Macbeth had also broken the concept or order which God established at creation, this was something unnatural. When this happens there is chaos, and Macbeth's act created chaos in the realm. Where there is no order the law of the jungle prevails, and this was what Macbeth had unleashed in the realm of Scotland. One murder led to several others in Macbeth's search for security.

Lady Macbeth thought a little water could wash away the sin caused by her husband's hideous

crime, so throughout the play she is constantly washing her hands. The point is, where there is no repentance, there can be no cleansing. Lady Macbeth had grieved the Spirit. She had prayed for power to carry out the deed herself, had her husband failed to do so.

She says:

I have given suck, and know  
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:  
 I would while it was smiling in my face,  
 Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
 And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn.  
 As you have done to this.

(Act 1.vii.54-58).

This is the order of Nature which Lady Macbeth violates. She can no longer respond to the voice of God.

Macduff, a General of Duncan's army describes the murder in religious terms:

Most sacriligeous murder that broke ope  
 The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence  
 The life o' th' building.

(Act 11.iii.69-71)

At the time of Duncan's murder, the whole creation groaned and manifested its discord in darkness and earthquake. The people had heard it and knew something dreadful had happened. It was the same manifestation when Jesus, the Innocent One, was crucified.

### **GOOD AND EVIL**

The theme of good and evil--this dual nature in man--is paramount in Macbeth. Although at the outset of the play Macbeth is described as "Too full of the milk of human kindness" (Act 1.v.17) he is capable of murdering Duncan, the acknowledged good and gracious king who is his guest and kinsman. This dual nature of being is an inherent flaw in man, and predisposes him to trouble. Job

notes that "man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7). Time has not changed this aspect of human existence. Shakespeare does not fail to remind his audience of this problem.

Biblical religion consistently maintains the doctrine of the goodness of creation precisely on the ground that it is created by God. In this doctrine the foundation is laid for the Biblical emphasis upon the meaningfulness of human history. Scripture records that God looked at everything he had made and it was very good. But the fact is, as many critics including Wilson Knight agree, evil came out of good. Adam was created perfect, but the devil beguiled him into breaking and transcending the limits which God had set for him--the law which governed his existence in a perfect state. By doing so, the contradictions of life were set in motion. The question of good and evil is then bound up in the nature of the choices man makes, and Shakespeare uses tragedy as the vehicle of expression for most of what men have felt and thought about the human predicament. "Of all earth's creatures man is the only one aware of inevitable death and curious about the value of life. From awareness of mortality comes the conception of immortality, and from the life-death antimony," says Harbage, "come ultimately all religious and moral codes, including Shakespeare's eclectic code of affirmation."<sup>11</sup> We do not, however, earn salvation by works. It is a gift, and we are saved by grace through a faith that works.

The forces of good and evil have co-existed and are always at war for the soul of man who is both the child of God and a sinner bound and free (See Romans 7:19). Macbeth admits that he has given his "eternal jewel to the common enemy of man" (Act 111.i.67-68), and knows what it means. When he is about to kill Duncan and the bell rings, he says, 'Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell/That summons thee to Heaven or to Hell" (Act 11.i.63-64). But, in spite of the fact that he is aware of the consequences of his act, he persists in making the wrong choice.

Shakespeare consistently keeps before his audience the consciousness of choice. Man is not forced to choose evil. In Romans 5:19 we are told that, "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous." Man is free to choose redemption by accepting the sacrifice of Christ on the cross on his behalf. In Macbeth we observe that Macbeth is always conscious of the choice he makes. He is in control of his will. Meditating on Banquo's murder he says, "I could with bare-fac'd power sweep him from my sight/And bid my will avouch it..." (Act 111.i.117-119). After killing Duncan, he could have chosen to repent, but instead he says, "I am in blood/Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,/Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (Act 111.i.135-137). In his play, the concept of evil is so strong that one not only sees it, but feels it and abhors it.

Shakespeare not only demonstrates that man chooses his destiny, but also explains that there are only two ultimate ends or ways (compare Ps. 1:1-3). This is not to say that the dead go straight to hell or heaven at death, which is the conception of the status of the dead held by some. Shakespeare reveals the orthodox Churches' view of the status of the dead when he makes it evident that man's final destiny is decided at the 'last trumpet.' In the Scripture, the 'last trumpet' is a call to judgement. In 1 Thessalonians 4:16 we read: "For the Lord himself will descend from the heaven with a cry of command... and with the sound of the trumpet, of God, and the dead in Christ shall rise first." By implication, there are those who die not in the Lord. But this must be expected, human nature being what it is.

Shakespeare's plays have stood the test of time, because as Johnson says, "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representation of true nature. It is the universal truths about human nature that sustain their constant appeal: "They were the genuine progeny of common humanity, such

as the world will always supply, and observation will always find.”<sup>12</sup> After observing these plays, however, we feel that Shakespeare gives the assurance that good will eventually triumph over evil and the original innocence and order will finally be restored.

### **ULTIMATE DEPENDENCE IS ON GOD**

The responsibility of fathers to children is also another theme in *Macbeth*. Shakespeare puts emphasis on the responsibility of father to show love, offer protection and be the provider for the family. When Macduff flees the wrath of Macbeth and leaves his wife with the children insecure and unprotected she says:

Wisdom! to leave his wife, to leave his babes,  
His mansion, and his titles, in a place  
From whence himself does fly? He loves us not:  
He wants the natural touch; for the poor wren,  
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,  
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl

Act IV.ii.6-11.

Conceiving Macduff as improvident, she asks her son, “How will you live?” to which he replies, “as birds do mother” (Act IV.ii.31-32). In contrast to his mother’s view, young Macduff embodies within his thinking the fact that God provides for the birds. In the final analysis, our dependence is on God.

### **SIN AND DEATH**

Many critics have noted the fact that the works of Shakespeare vibrate with the realization of death as a living presence. It is the human predicament--its inevitability and its mystery. The Bible is clear on the issue-- “The wages of sin is death” (Rom.6:23). Adam by rejecting faith in God as his

creator and sustainer had brought the curse on himself. God had breathed in his nostrils the breath of life and he became a living soul--a unity of body and mind. At death he is a dead soul, and Shakespeare seems concerned about bringing this reality to the consciousness of his audiences. The reason could well be a warning based on the corruption and treachery that were so prevalent in the society of the times. Sidney's idea was that "high and mighty tragedy" castigated vice by showing its consequences to the vicious, and taught kings "not to be tyrants."<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding this motive, however, the end remains the same--the meaning of death which levels not only kings but all men, and shows man's helplessness against God's omnipotence.

Shakespeare seemed to have been a good observer of his society, as in the plays he documents many types of sins--pride, rebellion, tyranny, murder, lust, ingratitude, adultery and drunkenness. These were all eroding the fundamental and traditional values so essential to the order of the state. This approach to his work reflects the accepted theory that poetry is meant to please and to teach. The context in which all these sins occur also shows that they were committed because the sinner went beyond the limit of his freedom and exercised his will-to-power. In exercising his will-to-power destructively, man disturbs not only the harmony of his own microcosm, but also the harmony of the macrocosm.

Shakespeare attributes the sin which occasions the fall of his tragic heroes, Macbeth in this case, to a lack of self-knowledge due to spiritual blindness, a view substantiated by Paul when he states that "their foolish heart was darkened" and "they became vain in their imaginations." But sin is not inevitable, it involves an element of conscious perversity. Note what Macbeth says:

It were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly: if th' assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch

With his surcease success; that but this blow  
 Might be the be-all and the end-all - here,  
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
 We'd jump the life to come. - But in these cases,  
 We still have judgement here; that we but teach  
 Bloody instruction, which, being taught, return  
 To plague th' inventor: this even-handed Justice  
 Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice  
 To our own lips. I have no spur  
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
 Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
 And falls on th'other--

Act 1.vii. 1-12, 25-28

Man in Shakespearean drama is never unconscious of his situation of being free and finite--the contradictions in his nature. He can through the exercise of reason and the Holy Spirit see sin and avoid its perils. An examination of the types of sins mentioned above can prove this assumption, and in the case of Macbeth, he has spoken and made his own confession.

Shakespeare presents sin in the full context of a Biblical Perspective. The phenomena of temptation, guilt, despair, confession, repentance and pardon are included in almost all the tragedies. Man's problem as it relates to sin is that he is blind. He lacks the spiritual insight necessary to look beyond the surface of things into the reality which is God. It is consoling, however, that God offers forgiveness for sins as long as we are willing to accept the offer, and Shakespeare by precept and example, gives this assurance, but Macbeth and Lady Macbeth rejected it. It is each one's responsibility to accept this offer and avoid the chaos and destruction which are the consequences of sin.

### PERSONAL AND SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF SIN

Sin is an estrangement from God caused in part or wholly by the transgression of His laws. It not only isolates man from God, but it also isolates him from his fellowmen. This is why sinful man needs reconciliation and redemption.

Because sin appeals to the intellect, when it captures it, man becomes irrational. There is therefore no limit to the damage that is done, and the effect it produces. Its consequences are bitter to the taste, frightening to the eyes, painful to the feeling, and shocking to the ears. This was the experience of our forefather Adam after he had sinned, and today we still partake of it.

Macbeth's ambition leads him into a power struggle with the King whom he assassinates along with some of his other leading officers. As is expected, he becomes a tyrant, and commits atrocities too hideous to describe. One critic refers to the play as a modern horror story. Naturally, he becomes isolated from society which sees him as a 'butcher,' and before he is 'butchered,' Scotland reels beneath the desolation and terror let loose in the land. Before Macbeth dies, however, he contemplates the fact that his ambition has deprived him of honour, love, obedience and friends—all the good things that should accompany old age.

As for Lady Macbeth his 'friendish' wife, Shakespeare shows her reduced to mental illness. She is isolated, and allegedly commits suicide as she is tortured by her conscience which she had earlier tried to kill.

When evil fills the hearts of men, they ignore the fact that the "even-handed Justice/Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice/To our own lips" (Act 1.vii.10-12).

### REDEMPTION

Shakespeare's plays are alive with the consciousness of the possibility of redemption which involves an admission of guilt, a willingness to repent, and the action necessary to enforce that willingness. We see many of Shakespeare's major characters acknowledging their sinfulness and making an effort to repent. But for many of them their efforts do not involve a submission of their will to God, and quite consciously they choose to go 'the primrose way' to destruction, example, Macbeth.

Macbeth expresses the need to escape from Satan's net in which he has been caught, but has not been able to achieve the freedom he desires. He has taken his destiny into his own hand, and has forgotten the precious promise of grace.

L.C. Knights refers to Macbeth as a "statement of evil." That this is true can be seen at the very beginning in the appearance of the Witches, symbols of the evil forces set abroad in the world. The idea is also explicitly expressed in the reversal of values heard in their

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:  
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Act 1.i.11-12.

But in such a world the characters seek for redemption, even if unconsciously, or as a means of escaping punishment. We witness Lady Macbeth's vain attempts in the constant washing of her hands. Like Pilate in the case of Jesus, she is attempting to absolve herself of the responsibility of Duncan's death. But the spot is always there though she protests: "Out, damned spot! Out I say!.... "Hell is murky" (Act V.ii.33-34). Ironically, when Macbeth had sensed the horror of the crime, she told him, "A little water clears us of this deed" (Act 11.ii.67). Water, the symbol of cleansing, is a

recurrent image in the play, but neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth is able to claim its cleansing efficacy.

Before the crime was committed, Lady Macbeth had wished herself ‘unsexed’ that she might be troubled by “no compunctions visitings of Nature to shake her fell purpose” so she invoked the “murth’ring ministers who wait on Nature’s mischief” (Act 1.v. 48-50). When the deed is committed, “Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse the curtain’d sleep” (Act 11.i. 50-51). According to Bradley, “The failure of nature in Lady Macbeth is marked by her own fear of darkness, ‘She has light by her continually’. And in the one phrase of fear that escapes her lips even in sleep, it is of the darkness of the place of torment that she speaks.”

Man cannot by his own efforts gain redemption. He must submit himself to the higher powers of the spirit. The Biblical view is that the finiteness, dependence and the insufficiency of man’s

mortal life are facts which belong to God’s plan of creation and must be accepted with reverence and humility.

#### **CONCLUSION**

In the tragedy examined, Shakespeare sanctions the goodness of creation, a divine order in the universe, and man’s responsibility to maintain that order. He shows that man has fallen short of this expectation and evil has entered the world. As a result, a struggle has ensued in which the forces of good and evil are at war for the soul of man. But he is not left alone in this crisis. Shakespeare repeatedly shows that man has freedom of choice, the opportunity to assert his will. He may therefore choose to obey the laws laid down for his peaceful existence or follow his own inclination towards destruction.

In demonstrating this aspect of human existence, however, Shakespeare explores the nature of man in all its complexities, and reveals that there is no simple and clear path to eternity. Life is conditioned by circumstances, and our salvation depends on our responses and reactions to those circumstances in which we find ourselves.

In the play we also see that actions are followed by reactions, and every sinful act has consequences both personal and social. From what is observed, it becomes clear that righteousness exalts a nation, and sin is a reproach to any people. But life is dynamic, and whatever the situation, there can always be a new beginning.

On the question of what happens after death, Shakespeare illustrates the end of this life as a two-way path. Macbeth says, "I go, and it is done: the bell invites me. Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell/That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell" (Act 11.ii. 62-64). Shakespeare constantly suggests that evil doers will go to hell, and those capable of redemption will have their final abode in heaven.

Finally, we observe that from time immemorial, human nature has remained constant, and there is nothing new under the sun. Man is still concerned about the meaning of life and his destiny. He is still so good and yet so evil. We may therefore conclude with Wilson Knight that

The soul-life of a Shakespearean play is an enduring power of divine worth. Its perennial fire is as mysterious, as near and yet as far, as that of the sun, and like the sun, it burns on while generations pass.<sup>14</sup>

Shakespeare's plays are secular, but to the extent that they provide for us answers to the basic and fundamental questions of life - who am I? Where did I come from? And where am I going? They can be taught within the context of the Christian faith. It is the teacher that will make the difference.

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- <sup>5</sup> E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Middlesex: Chatto and Windus Ltd. 1968), p. 11.
- <sup>6</sup> Howse, p. 31.
- <sup>7</sup> Tillyard, p. 26.
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- <sup>12</sup> Kaplan, pp. 253-254.
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