Subtle spirituality: biblical allusions in ross gay’s "thank you”

“ Thank You” by Ross Gay is a concise and powerful poem, in which the poet deftly weaves together Christian themes and Biblical allusions to craft an elaborate ode to the Old Testament. The poem alludes to Biblical passages and stories such as the Song of Ascents and Absalom’s rebellion against King David. Through subtle word and form choices, as well as deliberate allusions to certain passages of the Bible, “ Thank You” is a nod to the Book of Psalms and, in the tradition of that book, offers readers advice about how best to live a spiritual, gratitude-driven life.

Written in the second person, “ Thank You” describes a nighttime scene in which “ you” are standing alone, “ half naked / and barefoot” (1-2). The earth speaks to you, whispering that everything earthly will soon come to an end. The poem’s speaker offers you directives: when this happens, do not be angry or scared. Instead, observe everything around you and be grateful for it all. The poem ends with the lines, “ Say only, thank you. / Thank you.” (13-14). The poem uses simple, mostly monosyllabic words, free verse, and repetition to create this lush and moving scene. The poem is saturated with Biblical allusions, some of which are more overt than others. “ Garden” may be the most obvious example – when the speaker lists things the reader should do, they write, “ Walk / through the garden’s dormant splendor” (11-12). “ Garden,” of course, may remind readers of the Garden of Eden in the Book of Genesis. Other places in the poem, Gay uses imagery that further develops the parallels between the poem’s setting and a garden, like “ in the frosty grass” (2) and “ watch the cloud / ascending from your lips” (10-11). The presence of the earth’s voice also reminds readers of the role God played in Eden – an entity that watched over and policed the garden,

speaking to its residents. “ Dust” is another Biblical word Gay uses, which further develops the comparison to Eden. The line “ all you love will turn to dust” (5) may remind readers of another line from Genesis: when God delineates Adam and Eve’s punishment, he says, “ By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (“ Genesis 3: 19”). Because Gay uses “ garden” and “ dust” in tandem, the parallels between Eden and the setting of “ Thank You” are clear.

Gay also references the Bible in more subtle ways, and many of his remaining allusions can be traced to stories about King David in the book 2 Samuel. Early in the book, David had been parading through Jerusalem wearing a linen ephod, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “ A Jewish priestly vestment, without sleeves” (“ Ephod”). Michal, the daughter of Saul, criticized this behavior, lamenting, “‘ How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!’” (2 Samuel 6: 20). “ Half naked” appears in the first line of “ Thank You.” “ Half naked,” uncommon a phrase as it may be, could be overlooked as a mere coincidence, were it not for the continued parallels between “ Thank You” and 2 Samuel. Later in the book, Absalom, one of David’s sons, develops a conspiracy against the king, and David must flee Jerusalem with the rest of his family and followers. The group wandered to Mount Olive, where they “ ascended” the slopes, barefoot, weeping, and with their faces covered (2 Samuel 15: 30). “ Thank You” does not explicitly mention weeping, but it does say the addressee of the poem is “ barefoot” (2), and the speaker orders the reader not to “ take

cover” (9). The question, then, is why would Gay choose to reference this specific Biblical story in so many ways?

For one thing, Gay attempts to characterize the addressee as vulnerable and shameful. Notice that “ Thank You” does not allude to parts of the Bible in which David is portrayed as noble or particularly powerful; instead, it chooses passages that show him in various states of shame, vulnerability, and humbleness. This is to say that the poem’s addressee is also small, naked, barefooted, and insignificant against the earth’s moaning – the poem’s overall message is, after all, that the earth’s spirit is a force so powerful that humans can do nothing against it but give thanks. Additionally, in the Bible, going barefoot may be a sign of reverence, indicating that one is walking on sacred ground. In the poem’s second mention of barefootedness, the speaker says to “ curl your toes / in the grass” (9-10). Here, the addressee is making a direct, physical connection with the earth. Tampering that connection with something as irreverent as shoes would be a disgrace. Finally, it is telling that this comparison, between addressee and David, likens the reader to a king. This may convey to readers that we are no inferior to David, nor to any king or person in power. The earth does not pick and choose to whom it applies its laws; we are all destined for dust, royalty or not.

By establishing that the addressee of the poem is in a vulnerable state, Gay gives himself grounds to offer readers advice. This advice is delivered in a form that may remind readers of still another section of the Bible: the Book of Psalms. Psalms, one of five poetical books in the Bible (“ The Poetical Books”), is comprised of “ sacred songs, or sacred poems meant to be sung”

(Britannica). According to Easton's Bible Dictionary, the psalms, especially the Song of Ascents, " are characterized by brevity, by a key-word, by epanaphora (i. e. repetition), and by their epigrammatic style" (Easton). Compare that definition to the structure of " Thank You." The poem certainly uses repetition, namely with the phrase " thank you," which is used three times, including in the title. The Oxford English Dictionary defines an epigram as " a short poem ending in a witty or ingenious turn of thought, to which the rest of the composition is intended to lead up" (" Epigram"). " Thank You" certainly has a turn: in lines 13 and 14, the poem's lines shorten abruptly, and it is the first place where the poet repeats the same phrase in quick succession. The poem has 14 lines, like a sonnet, so it is also reasonable to assume this turn may in fact be a volta.

The parallels between the structure of " Thank You" and the Book of Psalms do not end there. The poem resembles an English sonnet (although not in meter or rhyme scheme). The English word ' sonnet' is derived from the Middle French sonet, which meant " song or sung melody" (" Sonnet"). " Sonorous," a word Gay uses in line 3, is derived from this same French root. Remember that the psalms were sacred songs written to be sung aloud, and that, since the Reformation, the psalms have been turned into hymns to be sung in church services (Britannica). Gay's intentional use of form and word choice is another nod to this Biblical book.

Also, it should be noted that Gay structures his poem in groups of three. When directing readers of what not to do, the speaker lists three forbidden actions: " do not / raise your fist. Do not raise / your small voice against it. And do not / take cover" (6-9). Then, when telling readers what to do

instead, he does the same thing: “ curl your toes / into the grass, watch the cloud / ascending from your lips. Walk / through the garden’s dormant splendor” (9-12). Finally, he uses the poem’s key phrase, “ thank you,” three times. In Christian tradition, three is an important number, from the three wise men to the Trinity. Gay’s deliberate use of this number is still another parallel between “ Thank You” and the Bible. Finally, consider the content of the poem. This is a poet telling readers how they should live; it is a guideline, or a set of rules. This poem could be read as a guideline for how to worship. The psalms have been described in a similar way. “ Luke believed the psalms to be a source of guidance,” writes Encyclopedia Britannica. One may consider the Book of Psalms to be the rulebook of the Bible that informs readers of the best ways to worship and live – just as “ Thank You” does.

Clearly, there are parallels between “ Thank You” and both the Book of Psalms and 2 Samuel. However, it is important to be able to connect these nods and references with one another; otherwise, they can all be chalked up to mere coincidences. The connector between these two books is King David, who wrote four of the 150 psalms (“ Book of Psalms”). The portion of the Book in which David’s psalms appears is called the Song of Ascents, a collection of 14 psalms with roots in early Judaism. Gay uses “ ascent” in “ Thank You,” writing, “ watch the cloud / ascending from your lips” (10-11). Remember, too, that the English Standard Version of the Bible uses “ ascent” to describe David’s journey up Mount Olive during Absalom’s rebellion (2 Samuel 15: 30). Every word of “ Thank You” is intentional, and many of them can direct readers to very specific and deliberately chosen passages from the Bible. David’s psalms and “ Thank You” also share similar themes: in

Psalm 131, David writes, “ I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have calmed and quieted myself” (Psalms 131: 1). This is similar to Gay’s message, which is that some things are much too great for humans to comprehend.

Gay tells readers that we are no different from King David in this way; we are all humans, insignificant in the grand scheme of the universe, and startlingly tiny when faced with something as massive and powerful as the earth or God. We, these small and vulnerable creatures, need guidance, which both the psalms and Gay are able to provide. Gay offers readers this advice in a subtle way, perhaps so as to not deter non-religious folks from enjoying the poem. This is not a poem about God; it is a poem about being human, and the fears and uncertainties and insecurities that are inherent symptoms of that condition. Borrowing the form and content of the Bible allows “ Thank You” to read as a beautiful, witty, and compelling guide for how readers can best live their lives.

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