Born Sinner

In *Confessions,* Saint Augustine says, “that is the authentic happy life, to set one’s joy on you, grounded in you and caused by you” (10. 25). In stating that to love anything above God would be a misorientation of love, Saint Augustine necessitates that true happiness is dependent upon loving God. Dante takes this idea one step further in his *Inferno,* asserting that to love anything above God only leads to suffering. This tenet is derived from Dante's attribution of the cause of sin to the misorientation of love, and the equivalence of the sin and the punishment received in Hell. Because the punishment is a representation of the sin, and the punishment causes suffering, Dante conveys that the sin and hence the misorientation of love itself causes suffering. While this theme is consistent throughout the whole poem, it is most prominently seen in Canto 13, and as such the essay will focus on this canto. In his *Inferno,* Dante illustrates that a misorientation of love – loving something above God – causes suffering.

To love something above God is the common root of sin. When Piero delle Vigne tells the story his life on Earth, he embodies the misorientation of love as he venerates Emperor Frederick II above God by invoking and distorting the trinity. Piero’s statement, “I am he who held both the keys to the heart of Frederick and turned them” (13. 58-59), alludes to his namesake Peter the Apostle, who Jesus gave “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16). By connecting Piero’s “keys to the heart of Frederick” to Peter’s “keys to the kingdom of heaven,” Dante implicates that Piero saw the heart of Frederick as a form of divinity; as the heart is the container of the soul, this implies Piero saw Frederick’s soul as divine. This initial insight is compounded in the following tercet, where Piero claims, “I kept faith with my glorious office” (13. 62). While on the surface it appears a simple assertion of devotion to his emperor, the allegorical diction of “faith” and “glorious” once again illustrate Piero’s connection of his

emperor with God. Furthermore, by "keeping faith" with the office and not with God, Piero is prioritizing Frederick over God.

Piero solidifies his reverence for Frederick and misdirection of love through the use of triple constructions in his speech. On such construction is seen in the connection of "disdain" appearing in lines 70 and 71 and "worthy" in line 74, connected by their common Italian root, "*degno*." Another includes "unjust," "just," and "I swear," appearing on lines 72 and 74, connected by their similar Italian roots, "*guisto"* and "*guiro."* Triple patterns such as these recurring repeatedly throughout his speech evokes the trinity by mirroring it, thereby conjuring the idea of divinity. By infusing this trinity into his speech, Piero emphasizes both its importance and direct relevance to the subject of his talk. However, this connection is distorted by the triple construction of honorable terms for Frederick, "Caesar" (13. 65), "Augustus" (13. 68), and "lord" (13. 74), which serve to confer the holy trinity emphasized in the triple constructions throughout not onto God, but to Frederick. Moreover, the tercet of lines 73-75 – the central tercet of the canto – is the culmination of the three key triple constructions in "worthy," "I swear," and "Lord." The Italian word "*nove"* in the first line, which has the double meaning of "nine," indicates the nine total constructions that culminate in that tercet. It thus serves as both the climax of Piero's story and of his irony: he is giving his last assertion of his devotion to Frederick while heavily evoking the trinity, emphasizing concretely the placement of Frederick above God and illustrating that he loves Frederick more than God.

The triple constructions go further than illustrating Piero's veneration of Frederick, for they also serve to convey that loving Frederick as a divinity led to Piero's sin of suicide. Two more triple constructions, one a triple periphrasis for the personification of Envy and the other the triplet of "inflamed" in the following tercet, set up the tercet of Piero's suicide. Envy's triple

periphrasis in lines 64-66, “whore,” “her sluttish eyes,” and “common death and vice of courts” serve to establish ambiguity in the identity of Envy by not referring to Envy explicitly. This lack of concrete meaning behind the triple construction stands in stark contrast to the consistent verb tense and straightforward use of “inflamed” in the following tercet. The stark transition from uncertainty to certainty mirrors Piero’s fall, from the uncertainty of his standing and power after being accused, to the certain – and undesirable – end of him jailed. The use of “inflamed” in lines 67-69 also serve to create the sense of a wildfire spreading rapidly, both mirroring Piero’s descent and embodying its destructive power. Finally, in lines 70-72, Piero tells of his suicide while setting up two of the three triple constructions that ended in the “climax” tercet, lines 73-75. This establishes a connection between the two consecutive tercets: the passage where Piero commits suicide and the passage where he venerates Frederick above God. This connection conveys that because Piero loved Frederick more than God, when he lost his pseudo-lord he could not handle the disdain to the point where he took his own life. Thus, his lack of love for God above all else is what ultimately drove him to sin, illustrating that the misorientation of love is the root of sin.

When one sins, they separate themselves from God. When Piero delle Vigne commits suicide, he evokes the image of separating oneself from God via the allegory of the vine, in which Christ is the vine and his disciples the branches. Piero’s last name, “delle Vigne,” means “of the vine,” indicating that when he separated his body from the soul, he was really separating the soul from Christ, as Christ is allegorically tied into Piero’s body through his name. This separation from God is compounded by the distortion of the story of Adam and Eve and the original sin. In the beginning of the Canto, the pilgrim and Virgil find themselves in a “wood that no path marked,” akin to the Garden of Eden, only in this case instead of a beautiful garden the

wood is “knotted and twisted” and “dark in color” (13.3-5). Additionally, the Pilgrim is told to “break off some little twig” (13. 28) from a tree to gain knowledge about the circle of Hell they are in, mirroring the picking of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam and Eve committed the original sin, which caused a “war” to break out “within the members” of the human person (Romans 7.23), paralleling suicide as suicide can be characterized as the war within an individual between their body and soul. Furthermore, their sin led to their separation from God, both spiritually and physically, as they were forced to physically leave the Garden of Eden and be without God’s presence after separating themselves spiritually from him. Therefore, by connecting the theme of suicide in the canto with the original sin, Dante reinforces the connection between sin and separation from God. Moreover, connecting the canto and suicide to original sin implies that what is true of suicide applies ubiquitously to all sin as it is intrinsically connected to sin’s origin, thus pointing towards the generalizability of the themes of the Canto.

By sinning and separating themselves from God, people inherently suffer, which can be seen through the reflection of the sin in the punishment. When the pilgrim breaks a twig off the bush, “from the broken stump came forth words and blood together,” (13.43) as the bush spoke to the pilgrim through the gash caused by him. In order to talk, the bushes need to be damaged similarly to how they damaged their own bodies in suicide. Because they took those bodies – a gift from God – for granted, they now do not get to do what they used to easily do, such as speak, without great pain. In addition, when the pilgrim reaches out to break the twig off plant, the bush says “why do you split me?”(13. 33), which has a double meaning: one, he’s a plant and plants can be “split,” but more importantly, his cry echoes the split of the soul from the body in suicide. These connections between the sin itself and the punishment received point towards the resonance between punishment and sin.

The parallel between sin and punishment is reinforced by extending the punishment for suicides to related crimes. Late in the Canto, a nameless figure running through the forest gives up and "made one clump of himself and a bush" (13.122). The soul is later identified as Iacopo, who burned down his own home to please a whim, an example of extreme wastefulness. After fusing with the bush, Iacopo is attacked by dogs who are characterized as "ravenous and running like greyhounds loosed from the chain," (13. 125), alluding to the tale of Actaeon, who was eaten by his own hounds after being turned into a stag by the goddess Diana. The tale is a metaphor for being chased down by your own spendthrift and recklessness, in this case invoked to mirror Iacopo's lack of regard for his own property in burning it down. Furthermore, in fusing Iacopo with the bush Dante implies that by being wasteful to the point of self-harm, recklessness and spendthrift are in the same vein of suicide, which is why they are grouped in the same circle. Thus, the punishments for the spendthrifts, along with the suicides, are representations of the sin itself, indicating concretely that there is an equivalency between the punishment and the sin.

The punishments cause suffering and distortions of the soul. When the pilgrim entered the circle of Hell, "[he] heard cries of woe on every side but saw no person uttering them, so that all dismayed [he] stood still" (13. 22-24). The "cries of woe" point towards the suffering of the souls in the forest, while the pilgrim noticing "no person" suggests the lack of agency and loss of humanity of the souls in the forest. This is compounded later by syntactic methods in Piero's explanation of the punishment for suicides. When he refers to the human souls who commit suicide, he uses the pronoun "it," conveying the loss of humanity and the confinement to the base material world of the forest. Moreover, in his explanation Piero remarks, "the Harpies, feeding on its leaves, give it pain and a window for the pain." The souls again are stripped of power through their syntactic objectification. Furthermore, the necessity of pain to perform basic human

functions – in this case, to feel and express the pain itself – highlights the distortions of the soul in the punishment. The combination of the lack of humanity and agency, distortions of the soul, and pure pain throughout the Canto emphasize that the damned souls suffer as a result of their sin.

Because punishments cause suffering, and punishments themselves are simply a representation of the sin, the sin itself causes suffering. If the sin causes suffering, then the base of the sin – a misorientation of the love – is the root cause of suffering. Furthermore, by separating themselves from God, sinners are left alone with their misoriented love, meaning there is no escape and no hope for salvation from their suffering, until they turn away from sinning. Thus, Dante shows that when one loves anything above God, they are inherently suffering.

Dante's message echoes Augustine's centuries prior, only he develops the idea a step further. The conventional interpretation of sin is that it is enjoyable in the short term – hence why people do it – yet leads to suffering in the long term. Dante contradicts this notion to assert that to sin is to suffer, and the two cannot be separated, even if one thinks they are happy. Furthermore, Dante's poem asserts that a love for God is the only way to avoid pain and suffering. Evidently, for Dante, the specific rules and traditions of Christianity are not the most important aspect of the religion. Instead, the most integral aspect to faith is loving God.