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Crime and Punishment in Dante’s Hell

Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, detailing the spiritual journey of Dante the pilgrim as he traverses through his own personal Hell in an attempt to attain spiritual enlightenment, highlights the crimes committed by the sinful through the depiction of their punishment. The punishments of the sinners in Dante’s Hell are indicative of the crimes that they committed in life, and must be endured indefinitely as a ceaseless reminder of God’s judgement of them. This relationship between individual crimes and their subsequent punishments is portrayed by Dante one by one as Dante the pilgrim journeys across each circle of Hell and passes through each sin’s environment. Dante paints each environment to purposefully plant a vivid image in the reader’s mind of an extreme representation of the sin itself. Through this imagery, he places more emphasis on the irony of punishment being a reflection of the crime in Hell, as well as the unchanging nature and sense of finality of God’s retribution.

This idea of the punishment fitting the crime is seen as soon as Dante leaves the First Circle containing the virtuous heathens, and enters the section of Hell containing the sins of incontinence. The sinners placed within these circles (circles 2 through 5) are those who lacked self-control and moderation in their lives. They became consumed by their own desires, blinded to anything but that which they craved, and thus becoming blind to God. Because of this, they are condemned to Hell.

Upon stepping foot into the Second Circle containing the lustful in Canto 5, Dante and Virgil (the ancient Roman poet who serves as Dante’s guide through Hell) come across a great storm that carries with it those souls who in life were consumed by their own personal desires of lust, and thus shifted their attention away from God and onto their objects of desire. Here, Dante notices two such souls in particular, those of Paolo and Francesca, two lovers who were consumed by the affection that they secretly shared with each other and kept hidden from their respective spouses. This fixation on their lustful relationship ultimately led to their souls ending up in the tempest that dominates the Second Circle of Hell. Dante calls out to Francesca as the two ghosts fly by, inquiring about their fate. The two descend, all the while never taking their eyes from each other. Paolo and Francesca’s endless eye contact is their punishment, and is a direct reflection of their obsession with each other in life. Because of how consumed they were with pursuing their secretive relationship while they yet lived, they are stripped of everything else in death, forced to gaze at nothing else and thus removing any sense of self identity as well as any connection with anything but the other’s eyes, including God. The environment in which the lustful “live” out the rest of their days is that of a tumultuous storm that spins incessantly, sending the souls of the lustful in circles with a passion much like that which condemned them to this place to begin with, and thus emphasizes the theme of the environment fitting the crime.

As Dante and his guide move forward, they continue to encounter environments that fit the crimes. The sins of violence are no exception to this. This sin, which constitutes the seventh circle of Hell, is divided into 3 sections: violence towards others, violence towards oneself, and violence towards God and nature. What sets the sins of violence apart from the sins of incontinence is the sinner’s conscious decision to cause harm rather than engaging in fits of passion and having a lack of self-control that defined those found guilty of sins of incontinence. The 1st round of the 7th circle contains the murderers, bandits, and warmongers, and depicts perfectly the tie Dante creates between the environment and punishment that the sinners must endure to the crime itself.

In Canto 12, before descending into the 7th circle itself, Dante and Virgil must first pass by the Minotaur that guards the entrance to the violent. The Minotaur is a perfect embodiment of the sins of violence. The Minotaur, being half beast and half man, exudes violence in every way and thus epitomizes the souls found within the circle. After passing the Minotaur with the aid of Virgil, Dante and his guide come to the Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood containing the violent towards others. Along the river’s bank trot several centaurs with bows who shoot at anyone who attempts to escape the scalding blood. Once again, Dante uses the half beast half man creature to reinforce an atmosphere of violence. Translator John Sinclair comments on this very observation, stating that many commentators of Dante’s works saw the centaurs to be “representative or symbolical of the *condottieri* of the time, the hired soldiers of the tyrants and communes of Italy” (Sinclair, p 164). By tying the centaurs to Italian foot soldiers, the relationship between them and the sinners in the river is quite ironic, with the underlings of the latter in life being their tormentor in death. After walking down to the bank of the river and negotiating with the centaurs for an escort across the river, Dante observes silently the many souls trapped in the broiling liquid. Each is submerged at a different level, with some covered nearly completely such as the tyrant Alexander of Macedon, and some only standing ankle deep. This difference can most likely be attributed to the amount of blood these individuals spilled in life, with those who ran rampant with violence nearly drowning in the blood of their victims, and those that committed far less atrocious acts of violence having only their feet submerged. Throughout the canto, the punishments of the violent against others are violent themselves, and so continue the motif of punishment fitting the crime.

After passing through the 7th circle and leaving the sins of violence, Dante and Virgil reach the 2 circles of Hell containing the sins of fraud. The sins of fraud, like the sins of violence, are divided into 2 distinct categories. Simple fraud, which contains a multitude of separate sinners including panderers and seducers, flatterers, simonists, diviners, barrators, hypocrites, thieves, fraudulent counselors, makers of discord, and falsifiers, is set apart from the sins of treachery due to a distinct difference. Simple fraud is any act of deception for personal gain, whereas treachery is the deliberate breaching of trust for personal gain. The main difference here is the deliberateness behind the act committed. These sins are the lowest in hell due to the havoc that they wreak in society in comparison to sins of incontinence and violence. The breakdown of trust committed by those found within the 8th and 9th circles of Hell destroy the very thing that allows civilized societies to function. For this reason, these sinners are placed the farthest possible distance from society: the lowest depths of Hell.

As with the previous two categories of sin, fraud and treachery mirror the crime committed in the punishment dealt. This is illustrated by Dante perfectly in the 32nd Canto when Dante and Virgil gain entry to Cocytus, the frozen lake encompassing the 9th and final circle of Hell. Here in Caina, the outer segment of Cocytus, those who committed treachery towards their kin reside frozen just below the surface of the ice. Many of the trapped souls are seen in various states of cannibalism. By depicting these sinners in the act of cannibalism, Dante is further distancing them from humanity and what is considered humane. Additionally, this feeding on others is paralleled by the “feeding” on the trust of society for their own personal gain that these souls carried out in life. The frozen environment of the 9th circle echoes the coldness inherent in treachery, and thus rounds out the pattern of the environment of the sin reflecting the sin itself. Even the title Caina, named so after Cain who killed his brother Abel from the book of Genesis, is Dante applying biblical reference to further exemplify the connection between the sin and the environment. Dante spends little time in Caina, interacting with the dead around him only twice. The second of these interactions occurs after Dante kicks the face of an upturned body in the ice on accident. The soul cries out in pain, and Dante offers to tell of the man’s story if only the man would give Dante his name. The man refuses violently, exclaiming “What I crave for is the opposite. Take thyself hence and do not vex me further, for thou ill knowest how to flatter in this depth” (Canto 32, p 399). Compared to Dante’s earlier interactions with the dead in Hell, this man’s reaction stands out as different in that he does not want to be remembered and would rather his name slip from the memory of the world. The sins of treachery leave the largest mark on the world, and thus are remembered the longest. However, the sociopaths who commit treachery would rather the horribleness tied to their name slide from memory and their name slip back into anonymity.

Comparing the three major sin categories, there is a direct correlation between the destructive nature of the sin within society and its subsequent position in Dante’s Hell. Those sins that have the least effect on society (the sins of incontinence) are located in earlier circles, while those sins that crumble the foundations of the fabric of society (the sins of treachery) are located in the deepest pits of Hell. This is the ultimate illustration of the tie between the environment/punishment and the crime committed. The vilest of sins not only receive the vilest of punishments, but also are placed the farthest from where they committed those crimes, and subsequently the farthest from God’s grace. Being so far from God, the treacherous embody the opposite of that which God represents and thus must be positioned opposite of God, much like Lucifer.

Dante’s journey towards spiritual enlightenment illustrates the irony with which punishment is dealt in Hell. In every circle, the sinners are condemned to never-ending torture akin to the very sin that they committed in life. Not only does Dante show this irony through the punishment of the sinners, but through the environment of each sin itself. From the passionate storm of the lustful, to the boiling river of blood drowning the violent, and the frozen lake of Cocytus trapping the souls of treachery, Dante paints a vivid image of the ceaseless suffering that Hell doles out to those imprisoned within.