

Dante's Inferno: To Hell with My Enemies

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When Reading Dante's *Inferno*, the reader not only takes a journey through the pits of Hell, but through the depths of the author Dante himself. As Dante descends with his guide, Virgil, down through the Earth witnessing the levels of Hell, he reveals details about himself layered within the imagery and in the tales of torment described in the epic poem. When learning more about Dante as an author, the reasons behind why he has organized Hell in this way become more apparent. In this paper, I will show that Dante was not just attempting to portray a vision of Hell in its most immaculate form, but as author and God of his own creation, *The Inferno*, he creates his own version of Hell where the sins he despises and those who commit them will forever incur the punishments he believes they deserve.

To understand Dante's vision of what eternal torment looks like, it's important to first look at the life of Dante as he existed in late 13th century Italy to gain insight into the factors from his personal life which bleed heavily into this work. Around 1300 A.D. when the poem was written, Dante was thoroughly involved in the social matters of his hometown Florence, serving in political positions and in the military. At a time when opinions were split regarding the absolute power of the Catholic church over the city-states, and even his own party divided in two, Dante

found himself at odds with not only the church and government, but his own family (Wetherbee et. al).

Because of his opposition to the overreaching authority of Pope Boniface VIII, Dante was exiled from Florence having to leave his entire life behind. Though he was ousted from the city, Dante continued to speak out against the Pope and his supporters making many enemies along the way who, not surprisingly, then appear strategically placed throughout the circles of hell suffering unimaginable torments. And while Dante did not believe in the absolute power of the church, he did believe strongly in the writings of the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic church weaving them into the work as an expression of his own concepts of ethics, morals, and justice. According to literary professor Christopher Kleinhenz, Dante makes reference to the Bible in *The Divine Comedy* with no less than six different types of Biblical reference used throughout (Kleinhenz 229). In doing so, Dante flawlessly employs his knowledge of holy writ pairing it with a prophetic tone making it appear as though the *Inferno* were an attempt at a tryout for the next canon.

Knowing a little more about the personal life of Dante, one can see how the conflicts of his life make an appearance in the fates of those he encounters while on his journey. Being aware of the issues Dante considered important and who in real life he despised, allows one to find cause for the way he perceives the order of transgressions to escalate especially in relation to who he believes committed the sins and why. Before entering into the levels of Hell that are associated with the worst of sins, it's important to note that outside of the entrance to the circles of more extreme levels of torment, reside the souls of many recognizable figures who Dante had intellectual respect for, so while they are placed in a realm separate from the God they did not become baptized in the name of, they are not subject to the harsher types of punishments which

he reserves for those he considers as being actually wicked. Here the reader finds great minds like Aristotle, Homer, Ibn Sima, Hippocrates, and others Dante deems virtuous in life, but by technicality, not deserving of the glory of Heaven.

So seeing where Dante places those to whom respect is owed, much worse then are the fates of those who are have known to have gained the antipathy of Dante in his actual, political, and religiously philosophical life. Dutifully armed with the promise of enemies being made into footstools and also eager hopes of them being thrown into a lake of fire, Dante proceeds to depict an epic scene where his innermost violent and hateful thoughts towards those that have wronged him become fantasies of heavenly ordained revenge. Moving into the second circle and beyond, Dante, or God, as he would have the reader believe, begins his judgment and classification of consciously committed sins in order of their perceived evilness and willful opposition to either him or God. In circles two through five, mortals are damned for the sins of incontinence starting firstly with the carnal and fleshly sins related to overindulgence and weak will then advancing through to the greedy, the sullen, and those unable to rein in their anger and wrath. These sins, determined to be rooted in matters of self-control, serve mostly as a starting point for Dante to separate the sins he views as most common in the population and among those he is otherwise on terms with, to those which he feels are committed in direct and willful defiance to the authority of God and in offense to him personally.

Moving past the grouping of fleshly sins and into the more serious transgressions involving hearsay and violence, many known enemies of Dante begin to appear. Traveling across the River Styx, a political foe rumored to have either slapped Dante in the face or had family that confiscated property belonging to him prior to his being exiled (Raffa), is shown rising from the slimy mud in a scene where Dante wishes to see this enemy, Fillipo Argenti, “scrubbed down

into the swill,” and then after watching him being viciously mangled, expresses gratitude to God for letting him witness it. (Alighieri.8.49.57) This interaction gives a peek into Dante’s own flaw of character as it’s apparent he delights in the idea of watching his enemies be tortured for his own sense of retribution rather than their being punished for having actually sinned against God, though he presents the two ideas here as inseparable.

After passing through the Gate of Dis entering into *Circle Six*, Dante encounters several people who he charges with heresy that were in either opposition to his political faction or held beliefs contradictory to those classically taught in the church. Continuing further down reaching into the next *Circle Seven*, are those imprisoned for sins involving violence, either against God, themselves, or their neighbor. Here Dante places several ruthless tyrants, warmongers, and killers alongside moneylenders, people he accuses of sodomy, and blasphemers, all of which Dante has individual issue with either ancestrally, religiously, or politically.

Journeying into the realm of Satan even further, are the innermost circles where the fraudulent and malicious are condemned to suffer the judgment of Dante and who incur the worst of punishments. First, coming upon flatterers who swim and gurgle in pools of steaming excrement and then upon those charged with simony who are buried head down with their feet lit on fire. Such as the fate Dante assigns to several popes including Nicholas III, Boniface VII, and Clement V, all of which he feels pandered for power and money in the name of God. Although in the earlier circles Dante expresses sadness for several of the souls he encounters, the sight of the disfigured diviners he faces while continuing through *Circle Eight* causes him to cry earning rebuke from his guide Virgil who says, “Still? Still like the other fools? There is no place for pity here. Who is more arrogant within his soul, who is more impious than one who dares to sorrow at God’s judgment?” (20.26.30) Seeing as how Dante himself decides the fates of those his

character is now feigning remorse for, it begs the question if Dante is attempting to imply in this scene that the judgments are not his but of God alone, so the reader need not implicate Dante, even though he is the author ultimately combining personal vendetta with religious rationale to determine where these pitiful excuses of souls end up.

Dante continues to travel deeper in Hell coming upon more and more people he has known of personally in life or through history incurring the scourge of him and God both. Leading to the worst kinds of sinners known to either, he passes by hypocrites, falsifiers, thieves, and evil counselors that once permeated the streets of Florence declaring to them, “Joy to you Florence, that your banners swell, beating their proud wings over land and sea, and that your name expands through all of Hell!” (24.1.3) By shouting this into an imaginative sea of damned Florentine souls, Dante expresses an internal all-consuming rage he directs at the multitudes of people he knew within the sea whose behavior he associates with enmity towards God through actions as they were committed towards him.

Making his way towards the center of the underworld and everything understood as being unholy, Dante assumes the role of accuser as the list of those who sinned against both God and him continues to multiply. Either acting in accordance to the evilness surrounding him, or once again letting leech through the totality of rage he possesses towards an entire Hells’ worth of enemies, he loses composure for a moment viciously attacking the restrained head of one of the more scorned sinners, earning his place for betraying Dante and his party in war. This sinner and others confined to the *Ninth Circle* are here for fraudulent crimes involving treachery, the most unforgivable sins known to man and heaven. It’s here, at the final depths, the beast of Satan rules as portrayed with Biblical similarity, a three-headed monster with blood and pus oozing out from its eyes, gnashing each razor-toothed mouth over and again into the body of another poor

damned soul. Suffering the most at the center, being chewed headfirst and the skin on his back peeled off in sheets, is Judas, betrayer of Jesus and of Christianity itself. On each mouth to either side, are the two assassins of Julius Caesar bearing this as their punishment for the eventual devastation of the Roman Republic. So at the very core of the Earth, where Satan reigns and every sinner receives their just reward, the culmination of this 14th-century revenge fantasy reaches its peak after taking the stage for every person, figure, and idea that could have ever crossed or opposed Dante to be met with the eternal suffering he feels their sinful souls so rightfully deserve.

For Dante to damn so many though it's not well hidden that he has his own lengthy list of sins to atone for, though reading *The Inferno*, it appears he may believe himself to be of a blessed nature and exempt from the layers of torment he designs for others. At some points, the lines blur between the punishments promised to sinners by God, to instead how Dante wishes to see the many who have wronged him suffer in Biblical proportion. While Dante did portray the imagery of Hell in a most spectacular form, it was a hell envisioned specifically for those he personally wanted to watch wail, contort, bleed and burn forever, and to serve as a warning for everybody else.

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