**The Psychology of Heaven and Hell**

Dante’s *Inferno* is overall a story about being lost in the woods, and discovering that one must travel through Hell and eventually get to Heaven in order to escape. *Inferno* focuses on the deathly travels through the circles of Hell, and spends most Cantos describing new levels of Hell. He is guided by Virgil, who is the damned soul of an ancient Roman poet. In this story, there is much talk about the psychology of happiness and despair, as illustrated by both Biblical and Hellenistic characters. As Dante continues to write about this story, he shows that his willingness to enter Hell comes from a deep passion to understand and sympathize with what it means to be in pain, and what it means to be happy. This is especially illustrated by the quote, “And she to me: ‘There is no greater sorrow / than thinking back upon a happy time / in misery – and this your teacher knows’” (Canto 5, page 43).

This quote is from much earlier in the story, but already deep in the depths of Hell. This is from the second circle of Hell, which is smaller than the first circle of Hell, but has much harsher punishments. The great monster Minos is there, and there is a seemingly endless line of sinners waiting for him to assign them their punishments. The sinners confess to Minos, and then he decides what is proper for each one. Minos wraps his tail around him a number of times to represent which circle of Hell they are to be sent to. Minos realizes that Dante is still living, and warns him not to proceed. However, he still manages to pass through safely, thanks to the assistance of Virgil.

In this Second Circle of Hell, the lustful are punished by having their souls thrown into a endless cycling windstorm. Dante wishes to speak to some of these souls, and with the help of Virgil, he identifies Helen of Troy, and Cleopatra. Dante feels despair for these souls, because he feels that they didn’t really do anything wrong other than love strongly. Thanks to Virgil, Dante is given the opportunity to speak to these souls, and he asks them to tell him their stories.

One soul does recognize him -- this is Francesca, who notices that Dante, is, in contrast, a living soul. Notice how many of these “lustful” souls are women? This really says a lot about the history of misogyny and slut-shaming in Christian mythology. However, it does also say a lot about Dante, because he is obviously viewing past the misogyny.

Regardless, Francesca laments on the life that she lived. She was unwillingly married to a deformed, elderly man, and she fell for her husband’s little brother, Paolo da Rimini. The two of them read a romantic story and started kissing one another. Francesca’s husband discovered this and had them both executed. The two of them were then doomed to an eternity in this Second Circle of Hell. Dante is overwhelmed by this terribly sad story, and faints with despair. Dante has a noticeable empathy for what is considered to be “evil,” meaning that he probably has a very different definition of evil than God Himself.

When Francesca speaks of this, she is lamenting over how her love for Paolo brought her so much joy, and yet now that she is in Hell for this, the joy of the memory has become tainted by the pain that came from it. She has faced the greatest punishment for the greatest joy. She refers to this as a “happy time in misery” because she was so miserable being married to her husband, and the kissing of Paolo was one of the few forms of joy that she could find while being in such a miserable time.

Ironically, being stuck in the Second Circle of Hell with Paolo himself is one of the many things that intensifies this love and misery. Because Francesca has been damned to be stuck with him for eternity, she is forced to be eternally reminded of this joy among sorrow which created her own eternal sorrow. Francesca’s torment shows that joy cannot exist without pain, and that pain cannot exist without joy.

If one has ever seen Disney-Pixar’s *Inside Out,* there is a very notable scene where joyous core memories are touched by Sadness, making them sad. This is a very good visual representation of this sort of thing. Riley, the girl with these core memories, can no longer view these happy memories without them being tainted by sadness, because they have been ruined with what happened after those happy times. This, in many ways, is exactly what has happened to Francesca. While she might not have literal emotion-people inside her head controlling her, and her memories might not be literal glassy balls inside her head, it is a good visual explanation for this exact sort of dilemma.

In this quote in particular, Francesca isn’t just lamenting about how being damned for finding joy in a hellish time for her literally brought her to Hell. She’s not just lamenting about how thinking about what was joy for her is too painful now that she knows what came out of that situation. No, this goes much, much, deeper than that. In this quote, Francesca is also lamenting about how even just the presence of Paolo himself, is, also, the Hell within joy within Hell. The “happy time” she speaks of isn’t just memory -- it is the literal presence of Paolo.

As anyone who has lived on the Earth can relate, being stuck with someone who reminds you of something you wish you could forget is just another way of enhancing that memory. Therefore, while it could seem strange to put them together after the joy they had on Earth, it is essential to her own Hell that she is put together with this soul, making it even harder for her to forget the previously-joyous thing that brought her so much pain.

In Hell, Francesca is being forced to remember “back upon a happy time,” while, well, “in misery.” However, this isn’t just about being nonstop reminded of her joy which turned into trauma and being surrounded by Paolo and stuck forever in the depths of Hell itself. Francesca is also talking about the psychological problem on Earth -- how even before death, her good memories of kissing Paolo were quickly ruined. Even before Francesca herself entered Hell, she already had to go through a similar form of it, because she already had to handle the pain of being caught, and the physical and psychological horror of experiencing death through execution.

When Francesca says, “this your teacher knows,” there are many ways that “teacher” can be interpreted in this context. The most obvious person she’s referring to is Virgil, because he is a damned soul who understands what it’s like to be in Hell. Even though Virgil himself has not had this exact same situation, he can relate to what it’s like to do something that one regrets and thus receive the ultimate eternal punishment.

However, this doesn’t stop at Virgil -- Francesca is also talking about how this is something that would be known in Dante’s mind. Dante portrays himself as a sympathetic, knowledgeable character who has a deep love for these damned souls, and obviously thinks very highly of himself. Is this how he behaved in real life? I do not know. What I do know is that Dante very clearly wrote this story out of his own love for Hell, and all the characters who are known for it.

While this could be dismissed as Dante being an edgy goth who wanted to write counter-culture content to the Hell-hating culture of Christianity, I think that this goes much deeper than that. I think that Dante writes about these characters in this way not just because the conclusions about him being edgy are probably fairly accurate, but also because he wants to write about the psychological meanings of happiness. The entire story is about being lost, having to travel through the Circles of Hell, and then finding an exit through Heaven. While the story is by no doubts terribly edgy, and that this quote in particular is edgy too, I don’t think that the entire meaning of this is edginess for the sake of edginess. As a fiction-writer myself, I believe that Dante is exploring his own personal meanings of happiness coexisting with despair, and metaphorizing it through his own story about traveling through Hell.

Now, one may ask, what does this have to do with the quote? Great question. When Dante is referenced as a “teacher,” this refers to the voice in Dante’s head -- both fictional and reality. This line simultaneously breaks the fourth wall and doesn’t break the fourth wall in the same breath. Dante is learning -- his fictional self learns by traveling, and his real self learns by writing. Dante obviously wants to show that he is open to learning from his surroundings, and, therefore, by writing and exploring in this way, Francesca is not just saying that Virgil would know what it’s literally like to be in Hell. Francesca is also saying that Dante, as someone who is using this opportunity to teach himself, both in fiction and reality, knows that good memories become tainted when they result in tragedy. He knows that being surrounded by someone who formerly had good association but has now become tainted is a cursing reminder of the trauma that tainted his view of them. He knows that the world is not an equal playing field, and that this makes these things even more difficult for marginalized groups, such as women. One could argue that he isn’t teaching himself, because he obviously knew these things already if he was writing about them. However, reminders are a healthy form of learning, and as any writer will tell you, the stuff that comes out of creative writing is usually ad-libbed and was thus not something that the writer was fully aware of.

While Dante shows that there is a light at the end of the tunnel, he also acknowledges that happiness can become diluted by trauma, and that what is considered to be “evil” by many standards is cruel and unforgiving. He shows that Hell is a human place, which wasn’t something that would’ve been widely believed in his culture. By both writing and visiting Francesca, he shows that happiness is hard to hold onto if one is in Hell. He shows that happiness, just like despair, is deeply complex and is an important, valuable virtue.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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