

Pity for the damned:
dante's quest for
personal
understanding



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the epic poem *The Inferno* by Dante Alighieri, Dante experiences pity for the damned souls in hell, which defies the Christian Church's concept of frowning upon those in purgatory. Canto XIII of *The Inferno* exemplifies Dante's ideas about people who commit suicide, which runs entirely contrary to the Church, who believes that those who commit suicide have dishonored God's gift of human life. Dante's defiance reflects his ability to analyze his surroundings and utilize his free will to think when released from the Church's grasp.

Interestingly, he is only able to feel complete mental freedom in Hell, the place the Church disdains. Therefore, this poem is Dante criticizing society for blindly following the Church and diminishing their ability to think for themselves, and the Church for creating this type of controlling environment. Canto XIII (The Forest of Suicides) is solely dedicated to suicides, unlike any other Canto, which illustrates the significance of this point in Dante's journey to the underworld. He passes through six levels of hell before reaching the circle of violence and he has not felt this much pity since the story of Francesca.

Upon entering the forest Dante questions his surroundings, an expected response of him. The entrance to the woods illustrates the pull between the imagined and experienced, and more importantly, what is written and left unsaid. Virgil tells Dante, "' Look well-you will see things that, in my telling, would seem to strip my words of truth. 'Lamentations I heard on every side but I saw no one who might be crying out so that, confused, I stopped'" (Dante 239) Dante's bewilderment personifies the strangeness of the

seventh circle of hell and his feeling towards suicides: confused, nervous, and wary.

Virgil brings Dante further into the woods because he believes that Dante should honor these souls and pay attention to them, for the possibility remains they were not shown attention in their lives on earth. Continuing through the forest, Virgil tempts Dante to break a twig and witness the result in response to Dante's joking comment of the sounds coming from the trees (239). To Dante's amazement, the twig bleeds human blood and speaks: "Why do you tear me? Have you no pity? /We were once men that now are turned to thorns... "(241).

Here Dante turns from a skeptic, to being fearful, to a believer of Virgil's words and in use of his free will to feel emotion. The pity he feels for the souls stuck in twisted thorny trees for eternity bothers him because imagining himself in their position is nerve wracking. Moreover, the punishment given to those who commit suicide is everlasting pain and suffering. Having rejected their bodies on earth, these souls are decreed unable to assume human form. In committing suicide, the souls declared their God-given bodies unimportant, a sin in Christianity.

Thus arguably Dante feels more pity for the souls in the forest because he understands that suicide commonly occurs from external pressures and disasters. Thus those in the forest are dead because of other people's actions, an unfair and unfortunate event. His pity shines through when Dante and Virgil conduct their ritual question and answer of the deceased. The souls trapped in the trees tell Virgil and Dante of how they got to the seventh

circle and Dante becomes incredibly worked up and cannot speak, demonstrating his heartfelt emotions and sympathy.

A soul speaks and says, "If one of you goes back into the world, let him restore my memory, which still lies helpless beneath the blow that envy dealt it"(243) This statement implies committing two sins, envy and suicide. Hearing his words, Dante becomes overwhelmed with despair. First he had no words in response because of shock and building emotion, but decides they must continue with the interviews. He says, " Please question him about the things you think I need to know. For I cannot, such pity fills my heart"(243).

Previously Dante could relate somewhat to each circle and fear their punishment for himself, but he has not experienced killing himself, yet the anguish he feels is elevated. Presumably he feels like this because he sees no way out for them besides Judgment Day, which is unlikely to release them from suffering. Virgil asks the souls if they can one day be free, but they do not seem hopeful (245). A soul resumes to explain what happens to their bodies when they arrive in the seventh circle; they are treated like a rotten piece of meat that not even a dog would eat.

Their bodies are flung without care into the forest, no specific place chosen, and it fastens down to sprout roots and grow into the thorny, horrifying mess they stepped in to. In a sense, the way the bodies are treated is another form of punishment. Since they went astray from God's plan, they are treated accordingly. Furthermore, once the thicket grows wild and big, The Harpies, terrifying creatures who live in the forest of suicides, feed on the

branches housing the souls, meaning their punishment is endless pain so they never forget the feeling of suicide.

Out of the blue two souls come running towards them, this encounter further reveals Dante's character. The souls are consciously running to their deaths with yearning and run into a thorn bush where a dog mangles the bodies and runs away with their limbs. Following straight after the event Dante and Virgil approach the bush the souls ran in to, as it was crying (247). Through this particular instance, Dante comments on the importance of nature in human life. Nature and Man coexist, but Man believes that nature is below us and therefore has the power to treat it as we please.

The bush did not want the soul to impound itself on it, but the soul did not consider that. Dante shows deep compassion for the bush simply by approaching it as if a physical human was crying. He breaks his nervous and confused mindset completely, exhibiting his change in heart and mind towards these tormented souls. Once the soul has rested in the bush, it has more concern for itself than when it was alive. The soul's physical body was what pained him and being known as the person he once was seems to have been overwhelming.

Why this is remains unknown, but the reason is unimportant because the fact that someone would detest themselves or their life to such a great extent, means something must have happened to them that could not be erased. The act of killing his or herself was an act of relief from their previous identity, which is expressed through his concern for its bush after death: "O

souls who have arrived to see the shameless carnage that has torn me from my leaves, /gather them here at the foot of this wretched bush'"(247).

The nameless soul asks for a simple and modest favor, which further shows its relaxed state of mind. Dante of course pities the soul, and being a learned man, acknowledges the importance of people's relationship with the natural world. He helps the soul because he realizes it was once human but because of unfortunate events it resides in the forest. Moreover, Dante's act exposes the anger within himself for his treatment of the branch when he entered the forest. Breaking the twig and seeing it bleed was terrifying and unexpected, but he has a chance to redeem himself by collecting the leaves for the soul.

The decision to leave the soul nameless indicates the commonality of suicide during this time period, which alludes to a misshapen society. If the Florentine people were commonly killing themselves and going against the Church, their reasons must have been grand because devotion to the Church was everything and almost mandated if one desired acceptance. Therefore, through having a nameless soul Dante criticizes the Church and their punishments and implying that life was worse than hell.

When the soul speaks of Florence and identifies himself as Florentine from his reference to Mars (155), Dante feels even greater pity because he is reminded of disturbing incidents of suicide and hanging where he grew up. Likely Dante knew people who committed suicide, which would make his sadness stronger. Knowing that someone you love must endure such a terrible afterlife is devastating, so for the love of his homeland and to help

the souls in the forest, Dante loses fear and shock and genuinely helps the soul, which is an important moment.

He has not felt sad enough to help any other soul in hell, but this one is different because it resonates with him on a personal level. Dante's grief throughout *Inferno* raises the issue of God's Divine Justice and if his punishments are fair. By questioning God's power, Dante puts himself out on the line and forces the reader to question God as well, aiming to alleviate the pressures of the Church on the individual and allowing one to think for one's self.

Although Dante concludes that the crime fits the punishment, he shows remorse for the souls. His remorse sprouts from his acute awareness of his surroundings and understanding of his standing on earth. Without reading *Inferno* through Dante's eyes, the reader could not have comprehended the importance of each circle of hell for him. Not only is Dante's journey a trip to the underworld; it is a journey to find himself. The opening lines of the epic poem illustrate his internal unrest by describing the "dark wood" where his path was lost (3).

Entering each circle of hell means a learning experience for Dante and a chance to figure out who he is and where he wants to go in life. By Canto XIII his evolution is evident. Instead of collapsing from pity, he overcomes his emotions and allows himself to interact with the nameless soul. Dante has matured since entering Limbo, which benefits him in as he descends deeper into hell because he has the chance to analyze the soul's situation and connect further, rather than assuming the role of the fainthearted.