

Ovid and dante: the power of imagery



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In *Metamorphoses*, Ovid attempts the great task of recounting the history of the world, from its creation to the death of Julius Caesar. However, Ovid's work is not solely an encyclopaedia of mythology; it is also the source of much standard figurative language. Similarly, Dante Alighieri attempts to achieve the great task of assembling a visionary narrative. The *Inferno* is a highly structured vision of the future that not only highlights the Christian religion, but also integrates many mythological figures of the past. But the genius of Dante lies not in the grand vision he has dreamed of, but in the way that he has presented it. Through his poem, Dante aims to inspire fear in his readers; he hopes to create a future that is more real than the present so that his readers will repent. To achieve this goal, Dante employs highly concrete imagery. Ovid strives towards an opposite purpose; in his portrayal of specific myths, Ovid aims to evoke a past that is identical to the present. He aims to convince readers that the glorious warriors and fantastical gods of the past are very much like themselves, and thus aims to disenchant his readers. Much like Dante, Ovid also exploits imagery to achieve his goal. However, the ways that these two poets use imagery are different because their purposes are so radically different.

Ovid's imagery tends to focus on emotions and abstract concepts, rather than physical details. This is particularly true in the case of the myth of Medea. Often described as a vindictive witch, Medea is presented as a sympathetic character by Ovid. Instead of focusing on the shocking acts that Medea commits, Ovid spotlights her great affection for Jason.

as when a spark that has been hidden under

a crust of ash is nourished by a breeze

and comes to life again as it's stirred up,

regaining all the vigor it once had;

just so her smoldering love, which you'd have thought

was almost out, came blazing up anew (226)

By illustrating Medea's love as fire, Ovid helps the reader to imagine Medea's emotions. Like a fire, Medea's love is wild, spontaneous, and dangerous. Her infatuation is a spark that catches onto anything, and then spreads wildly. By using diction like "vigor", "smoldering", and "blazing", Ovid reinforces the notion that her love is intense and strong. The image of an irrepressible flame is a powerful one; more importantly, it is realistic. In reality, emotions are uncontrollable, and this concept can be easily identified with. Any horrifying acts that Medea commits afterwards seem explainable in consideration of this dangerous love. Medea is no longer an ultimate mythical warning for infidelity, but an abandoned wife who has lost all hope. She is no longer the mother who murdered her own children, but one who has undeniable human emotions. Often, Ovid must work with characters who are often fantastical in all aspects, like Medea. The only things that connect these characters to readers are emotions and abstract concepts. By creating emotionally charged imagery, Ovid is able to convince the reader that these fantastical characters are actually not very different from the reader, and that the myths are much like reality.

Dante, like Ovid, aims to create vivid imagery in order to convince the reader that the world of Inferno is genuine. Unlike Ovid, Dante focuses on the physical details. Dante attempts to create a world that his readers can easily imagine, a world that is concrete. After all, Dante's purpose is to compel his readers to realize that the future is more important than the present. Dante does by creating lucid images of the physical appearance of hell.

There is in Hell a vast and sloping ground

called Malebolge, a lost place of stone

as black as the great cliff that seals it round.

Precisely in the center of that place

there yawns a well extremely wide and deep.

I shall discuss it in its proper place. (158)

At each new site that the journey passes, Dante takes time to describe where everything is and how everything looks physically. He does so in order to create a definite and substantial image for the reader. Naturally, the reader knows exactly what the ground is like – “sloping...[yawning] a well”, what colour the stone is – “black”, how it is spatially – “wide and deep.”

Dante describes each new creature, each new situation in the same way as well. Although Dante does describe abstract ideas such as emotion, they are absent from the imagery. Through the use of physical imagery, Dante is able

to mould his extraordinary world into something tangible and compelling for the reader.

Also in pursuit of the creation of a concrete world, Ovid faces different challenges. The stories that he writes are often exotic relative to everyday life. Consequently, Ovid inserts details into the imagery to inspire a sense of familiarity in the reader. Ovid concentrates detail on ordinary things, as opposed to focusing on dramatic things, such as death. Many myths in *Metamorphoses* convey a depressing vision of life. Ovid tries to neutralize this potentially bleak aspect of his narrative by creating detailed imagery of the beauty, of the people. In treating the myth of Daphne, Ovid is particularly successful. Instead of highlighting the fact that Daphne dies by transforming into a tree, Ovid concentrates on the splendour of Daphne herself.

Her prayer was scarcely finished when she feels

a torpor take possession of her limbs –

her supple trunk is girdled with a thin

layer of fine bark over her smooth skin;

her hair turns into foliage, her arms

grow into branches, sluggish roots adhere

to feet that were so recently so swift,

her head becomes the summit of a tree;

all that remains of her is a warm glow. (37)

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Daphne is stripped of her freedom and human form; this is not a pleasant situation. The attention of the reader, however, diverges from her death as a human being, and is instead caught up with the erotic beauty of the girl. The imagery greatly lessens the brutality of the situation. Ovid pays special attention to the details of each minute transformation to make this beauty seem more real. The reader can easily picture every feature, whether that is the “ thin layer of fine bark”, or the “ sluggish roots”. In addition, details such as the “ supple trunk” and “ smooth skin” help enhance the cozy and sultry tone. Overall, the imagery creates a sensual story as opposed to a brutal one. Thus, the story of Daphne becomes less mythical and more relatable.

Dante, on the other hand, does not try to distract us from the suffering. Instead, according to the purpose of his composition, he uses details to enhance the brutality of the situation. The reader is treated to cringe-worthy, detailed description of physical torture.

From every mouth a sinner's leg stuck out

as far as the calf. The soles were all ablaze

and the joints of the leg quivered and writhed about.

Withes and tethers would have snapped in their throes.

As oiled things blaze upon the surface only,

so did they burn from the heels to the points of their toes.

In this passage, the tactile imagery is very specific. The reader knows precisely what the torture feels like. The burning sensation is strictly identical to “oiled things [ablaze].” The pain is so intense that sinners “[quiver] and [writhe] about” so wildly that “withes and tethers would have snapped in their throes.” The details that are described allow readers are able to feel as if they are standing there on the ground of hell with the characters. Readers are able to imagine that they have truly witnessed the various punishments. Nothing is vague. No feature is unimagined. The gravity of each punishment, the terrible conditions of the environment affect the reader much more because they seem so authentic. Thus, Dante easily achieves his goal of inspiring fear in his readers. This future that he has projected – this frightening experience of hell – becomes even more concrete than the present through the use of detailed physical imagery.

Both Ovid and Dante use imagery to achieve their ideological goals in *Metamorphoses* and *Inferno*. Ovid uses emotionally charged imagery to create sympathetic characters, and generate details with positive diction to prevent a focus on cruelty. Through these two techniques, Ovid effectively inserts small slices of reality into his encyclopedia of mythology, making his creation a very honest portrayal of present life. Dante, in contrast, utilizes physical imagery to sculpt a world that he thinks is more important than the present. Dante also creates details, as Ovid does, but instead of preventing a focus on suffering, Dante concentrates his detail on suffering. The conditions of this extraordinary world that Dante creates become more concrete through the detailed physical imagery. By using imagery, both Ovid and Dante are able to convince the reader of opposing ideas: one being that the

past was no larger than the present, and the other being that the future is more important than the present.