

The symbolic use of rivers towards enlightenment in the divine comedy and siddhar...



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In literature, authors use symbolism to relay messages to the reader throughout a story. Rivers can portray many themes in a unique manner. In *The Divine Comedy* and *Siddhartha*, the protagonists cross rivers towards their goal of Enlightenment.

Dante crosses five rivers throughout his journey hell to paradise. *Siddhartha* crosses one river multiple times. Passage through rivers in both works has a profound effect on character growth towards Enlightenment for the protagonists. As Dante crosses a river, he learns something new; an aspect which he needs to progress in his journey. Dante and Virgil reach the River Acheron and observe countless souls boarding the ferry, rowed by Charon the ferryman. " Master, I long to know what souls these are, and what strange usage makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be in this infected light.

" 1 " Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear. " 2 Dante is at the beginning of his path and knows nothing of what he needs to reach his destination. Dante must experience fear for himself, and not refrain from it. Dante asks Virgil what he needs from this river, and Virgil tells him what he needs to do as he crosses the first river. As they cross the river, Dante begins to recognize sin and learn from it.

Since these souls are entering hell, they did not face their fear during their life. So, Divine Justice forces them to do this and makes them " eager" to do it. Dante must do this by himself and must be willing to do so. Therefore, the River Acheron represents the commencement of Dante's journey through

sin. As Dante traverses through Hell, his heart gradually hardens against the damned. Phlegyas, the ferryman of the River Styx, carries Dante and Virgil to the gates of lower Hell.

“ May you weep and wail to all eternity, for I know you, hell-dog, filthy as you are. ”³ This is Dante’s first act of aggression against sin towards Filippo Argenti. According to the author’s philosophy, it is necessary to take an aggressive stance towards sinful nature. Dante is growing towards Enlightenment and Virgil welcomes Dante’s rejection and Filippo Argenti is attacked by the other sinners answering Dante’s wrath.

Therefore, the River Styx represents Dante’s next stage toward recognizing and rejecting sin. When Dante reaches Cocytus the final circle of Hell, he reaches the point of absolute violence. Cocytus is a frozen river that holds the worst sinners as well as Satan himself. “ Either you tell me truly who you are, or you won’t have a hair left on your head. ”⁴ Dante has grown immensely from the River Acheron, where he faints in all of its horrors.

Here Dante acts against the harshest of sins, treachery, by attacking Bocca. Crossing the river, he has experienced all sin and is finally ready to purify himself. By going through Hell, Dante has experienced sin, and is ready to cleanse himself of it. Dante must be cleansed of all sin before reaching Enlightenment.

Dante approaches the River Lethe also known as the River of Forgetfulness.

“ Asperges me. Then the sweet lady took my head between her open arms ..

. dipped me and made me drink the waters that make clean. Then raising me in my new purity ... “ 5 In the River Lethe, Dante forgets all sin and is absolved.

“ Asperges me” is what is uttered when a priest sprinkles holy water over a confessed sinner to absolve him. Dante experiences a final absolution, releasing sin through confession and repentance as is needed to be pure. Dante crosses the river entering a pure state where one can reach Enlightenment. Therefore, Dante must experience sin and have it completely erased from him in order to reach Enlightenment.

Throughout Dante’s journey through Purgatory, he is being purged of sin. At the River Eunoe, or River of Purity, Dante crosses the last river and reaches Enlightenment. “ I came back from these holiest waters new, remade, reborn like a sun-wakened tree that spreads new foliage to the Spring dew in sweetest freshness, healed of Winter’s scars; perfect, pure and ready for the stars. 6 The River Eunoe represents Dante’s Final Purification where he crosses over to Enlightenment.

Each river has signified a new stage of Dante’s character growth. The words “ new, remade, reborn, like a sun-wakened tree”, explain that Dante’s journey is completed and he has crossed over from his human imperfections of sin and error, to his Enlightened state. Therefore, Dante has reached Paradise and completed his journey to Enlightenment. Just as Dante first questions the River Acheron, Siddhartha questions the importance of the river for Enlightenment. Siddhartha begins his journey as a Brahmin, based on his previous life, which are the closest people to spiritual Enlightenment.

“ Why must he, the blameless one, wash away his sins and endeavor to cleanse himself anew each day? ” 7 Even though Siddhartha is at the highest level before Enlightenment, he does not understand why he must perform ablutions to reach it. Both Siddhartha and Dante need to experience sin in order to progress through their journey. The river cannot elevate him spiritually because he does not understand sin which is why he must leave the river ablutions. In Dante, purification is the last stage to Enlightenment.

Since Siddhartha has not begun his journey, the ablutions cannot grant him Enlightenment. Rivers can lead one to learn new things about the journey of life to Enlightenment. On Siddhartha’s search for Enlightenment, he finds a river and a ferryman who takes Siddhartha across it. “ I have always learned something from it. One can learn much from a river. ” 8 The ferryman answers Siddhartha’s question of the river’s significance.

He tells Siddhartha the river has the answer to Siddhartha’s search. “ You will give it to me some other time...

I have learned that from the river too, everything comes back. ” 9 The ferryman knows that Siddhartha must enter the material world of sin. He also knows that he will recognize sin and not be engulfed by it, eventually returning to the spiritual world. Siddhartha must leave the spiritual world and actually diverge from Enlightenment in order to attain it. In the material world, Siddhartha is surrounded by sin.

After his journey through the material world, Siddhartha returns to the river and has experienced sin. “ He looked down and was completely filled with a desire to let himself go and be submerged in the water. A chilly emptiness in <https://assignbuster.com/the-symbolic-use-of-rivers-towards-enlightenment-in-the-divine-comedy-and-siddhartha-essay/>

the water reflected the terrible emptiness in his soul. “ 10 Siddhartha’s thoughts of suicide prove that he has experienced all sin of the material world.

The “ chilly emptiness in the water” can resemble the frozen river Cocytus, representing the lowest level of sin. The fact that the water reflected upon Siddhartha shows that he is at the farthest stage from Enlightenment. “ With a distorted countenance, he stared into the water. He saw his face reflected and spat at it;” 11 Siddhartha sees his thoughts of sinful suicide and prevents it from enveloping him by rejection.

This active disgust relates to Dante’s aggression towards Filippo Argenti and Bocca. Siddhartha has completed his journey through the material world and can return to the spiritual world leading to Enlightenment. The river is the connector of the material and spiritual world. “ Whoever understood this river and its secrets, would understand much more, many secrets, all secrets.

“ 12 Siddhartha is realizing that the river represents his journey and he could learn all from it. “ The water continually flowed and flowed and yet it was always there; it was always the same and yet every moment it was new” 13. Siddhartha only perceived the river as a divider which separated him from his goal, just as most people do. However, he now sees that it joins the two worlds and when they merge something “ new” is born.

This philosophy shows the need of a balance between the two worlds; once this is achieved one reaches Enlightenment. This opposes Dante’s

philosophy of needing to forget and purify from sin, expressed in the River <https://assignbuster.com/the-symbolic-use-of-rivers-towards-enlightenment-in-the-divine-comedy-and-siddhartha-essay/>

Lethe and Eunoe. Siddhartha must understand that material and spiritual worlds are unified to reach Enlightenment. Once Siddhartha realizes that everything is in unity, he will reach Enlightenment. Meaning and reality were not hidden somewhere behind things, they were in them, in all of them.

“ 14 Siddhartha says this after he sees Buddha, the Perfect one. He sees Enlightenment in another earlier in his journey, but could not attain it for himself because he had not experienced everything. “ The voices of all creatures are in its voice ..

. the holy Om ... “ 15 Once again Siddhartha sees Enlightenment in the aspects of the river.

But now, he has been to both worlds and experienced everything. Om represents the indestructible being at one with the universe. There is unity in all of nature, material and spiritual; these opposing things all have the same force that created them and binds them together. Enlightenment in Siddhartha is bred from unity of the eternity of the universe, which is expressed by the river.

Rivers lead the protagonists to Enlightenment in both The Divine Comedy and Siddhartha. When a character crosses a river, he reaches a new stage towards Enlightenment. The crossing of rivers plays a key role in both Dante and Siddhartha's journey. Authors use symbols to form messages to the reader within a story.