

# The exploration of virgil and dante's underworlds



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While physical life is transient, the notion of the immortality of the soul is central to Christianity. Before Dante wrote the Divine Comedy, the residence of the soul's afterlife was speculative and enigmatic. Dante filled this vacuum by creating a detailed and gruesome depiction of Hell where sinners are punished for the crimes they commit against the Christian God. Dante shapes his perception of Hell from Aeneas' journey to Dis in Book VI of Virgil's epic poem, *The Aeneid*. Although Dante derives his account from Virgil's writings of the Underworld, it is only a base to which he adapts and develops. Both poems are populated by figures from ancient Greek and Roman mythology and share similar structure and imagery for the exploration of the Underworld by living protagonists. The poems differ in intention with *The Inferno* focusing on Dante's voyage of self discovery, search for a Christian concept of the Underworld, while *The Aeneid's* intent was to glorify and celebrate the history of Rome, and the importance of fate. Although there are countless parallels in Dante and Aeneas' journeys to the Underworld, they follow divergent trajectories that set the tone for the Underworlds created. Aeneas learns in a dream that he must travel to the Underworld and visit his father before a homeland for his people can be established in Italy. Venus, his goddess mother, and the Sibyl, a prophetess of Apollo, guides Aeneas in his journey. In Book VI of *The Aeneid*, Virgil uses the Underworld to trace Rome's history back to the heroes of the Trojan War. Unlike Aeneas, Dante enters the pathway to Hell at the midpoint of his life, lost in personal crisis, and unsure of the spiritual road to follow. At the start of Canto I, Virgil is sent by God to escort him through the halls of Hells, so that he may find his way again. " For I had lost the path that does not stray.

Ah it is hard to speak of what it was, that savage forest, dense and difficult, which even in recall renews my fear” (Inferno I, 4-6). Dante is setting the scene for a more harrowing journey to the Underworld in which his character must endure.

Dante liberally borrows imagery, structure, and architecture of the Underworld from Virgil. The Aeneid served as a template for Dante’s masterpiece, and Dante acknowledges this by choosing Virgil as his guide through the Underworld. Dante and Aeneas both must cross The River of Styx to enter Hell and are ferried by Charon. Virgil, in The Aeneid writes, “Charon is the squalid ferryman... his white hairs lie thick, disheveled on his chin; his eyes are fires that stare, a filthy mantle hangs down his shoulder by a knot.” (Aeneid VI, 396-398). Dante’s description of Charon is similar, “And here advancing toward us, in a boat, an aged man his hair was white with years-was shouting: Woe to you corrupted Souls!” (Inferno III, 82-84). Virgil created a lower more horrific level of the Underworld known as Dis, guarded by one of the mythological Furies. Parallels can be seen in Dante’s Inferno where fallen angels, the three Furies, and Medusa guard his city of Dis. It is the darkest regions of Hell and encompasses circles six through nine. Virgil had also made reference to an Underworld of nine circles, but unlike Dante, he does not develop the concept into a rigid system where sinners are separated into nine circles depending on the severity of their sin, with the wicked sent into deeper circles with more severe punishments.

In both Epics, there exists a significant distinction in the shades desire to communicate with the living. When Aeneas passes the Fields of Mourning and recognizes Dido, he calls out to her, weeping with sympathy, and she

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responds by retreating into the depths of the forest. Conversely, in *The Inferno* Dante develops the concept that the shades become less interested in communicating as he ventures into the deeper circles. In Canto XXXII, Dante accidentally strikes the head of shade with his foot and after an exchange of verbal retorts, the shade refuses to reveal his identity. The shade's refusal to reveal his identity exposes his shame from residing in the first ring of the ninth circle of hell, home to the traitors of kin.

In *The Inferno* Dante's alteration of Virgil's ideas of how the living interact with shades dramatically affects the experience for Dante the pilgrim and readers. The structural difference in their protagonists' encounters with shades is the result of Dante's confrontational approach. In *The Inferno*, Dante equips himself with the power to touch the shades, whereas at one point in Virgil's story it is shown that Aeneas is unable to hug the shade of his father. "Three times he tried to throw his arms around Anchises' neck; and three times the shade escaped from that vain clasp." (*Aeneid* VI, 924-926). By adding physical aspect to encounters, Dante creates a more realistic and personal Underworld. The realism enhances the affect that Dante the pilgrim is in real danger. In a later scene in Canto XXXII scene, Bocca refuses to reveal his identity, and Dante responds by inflicting pain on him. "At that I grabbed him by the scruff and said: you'll have to name yourself to me or else you won't have even one hair left up here." (*Inferno* XXXII, 97-99). Dante's ability to physically interact with shades makes the Underworld tangible. Dante, a mere mortal inflicts further suffering on a soul, who is already being punished in one of the deepest circles of Hell.

The differences in the two Underworlds concepts of Limbo reflect a fundamental difference in religious philosophy between the paganism of Virgil's Rome and the medieval Christianity of Dante. The first stop for all souls in Virgil's Underworld is Limbo. There souls wait to cross the River of Styx and those whose bodies are unburied must wander for a hundred of years before Charon, the ferryman, will carry their souls to "start the pathway to the waters of Tartarean Acheron." (Aeneid VI 390-391). Nothing is crueller and more damning for a Trojan warrior than to die without an honorable burial. In Dante's Underworld the first stop is not Limbo, but the Ante-Inferno and Neutral. The Ante-Inferno is where souls who did not make conscious moral decision are housed because they do not constitute acceptance into either Heaven or Hell, and Neutral is where are the angels that neither sided with God nor Satan reside. Dante wrote, "The heavens, that their beauty not be lessened have cast them out, nor will deep Hell receive them-even the wicked cannot glory in them." (Inferno III 40-42)

Limbo in Dante's Underworld is the first ring of Hell after a soul crosses the River of Styx. Residing in Limbo are all the unbaptized including virtuous and moral pagans who were born before the First Coming. These souls did not sin, but Dante's view was Christian and according to Christian theology those who were unbaptized were damned to Hell and not allowed entry into heaven. Residing in this region were Virgil, along with other great Greek and Roman philosophers, poets, and heroes. For these sinners Dante had sympathy and creates a first circle where punishment was milder. Dante wrote, "There was no outcry louder than the sighs that caused the everlasting air to tremble. The sighs arose from sorrow without torments." (Dante IV 26-28). The different descriptions of Limbo by Dante and Virgil

demonstrate the fundamental Christianity of Dante's epic in contrast to the pagan aspects of Virgil's Underworld. The Underworld created by Dante is a rigid system, without forgiveness, unlike Virgil's Underworld, where after a hundred years souls are allowed to cross Styx and enter the Groves of the Blessedness.

Although in both epics shades are given the ability to see into the future the authors' intentions with these concepts vary. The climax in Aeneas' journey to the Underworld is when Anchises describes in detail what will become of their Trojan lineage, stating that Romulus will found Rome, a Caesar will eventually come from the line of Ascanius, and that Rome will reach a Golden Age of rule over the world. " Augustus Caesar, son of a god who will renew a golden age in Latium." (Aeneid, VI 1049-1050). It is clear that Virgil gives the souls living in the Land of the Blessedness the power to see into the future for the opportunity to celebrate Rome's future glory. In contrast Dante depicts the shades inability to see into the future as a means of inflicting suffering. In Canto X, Dante encounters Farinata, a Tuscan politician, and in the midst of their conversation another shade arises and voices concern about his son's fate. At this point, Dante has discovered another of the ingenious punishments in Hell confirmed when his fellow Tuscan tells him, " We see things remote from us... But when events draw near or are, our minds are useless;" (Inferno X, 100-102).

Dante is indebted to Virgil because he adopted many of the structures and characters of the Underworld from Book VI of The Aeneid; however, Dante transformed the epic poem about the history of Rome into a uniquely powerful exploration of a personal and Christian journey through the

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Underworld. As Virgil said to Dante “ For I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul” (Canto II 32, Dante can also say I am not Virgil. What Dante has accomplished in *The Inferno* is a powerful vision of a Christian exploration of sin and the divine retribution of God from the perspective of a medieval Christian. He also has made *The Inferno* a political and religious commentary. He criticizes the venality and immorality of member of the Catholic and comments on politics in his native Tuscany. Dante has borrowed mythological characters from Virgil and Roman mythology, but has transformed them into his own vision of the Underworld.