

Dante's a
hypothetical 70 years
lifespan. the setting



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Dante's *Inferno* follows the example of Homer's *Iliad* because it begins at the middle of Dante's life, makes a quick flash forward of his life and then comes to a quick end. The middle of Dante's life is characterized by the time he lost his way in life; at a presumable age of 35, which marked the middle of a hypothetical 70 years lifespan. The setting was in the Easter of 1300 AD but Dante did not make it to his 70-year lifespan (because he died from Malaria at the age of fifty-four) (Gutchess 1).

Dante's literary piece (*Inferno*) is an unprecedented work because seldom did writers of his time start a literary work by narrating their own life experiences (Gutchess 1). Nonetheless, since the Middle Ages, many writers have taken the cue and now follow Dante's footsteps. Some of the medieval dream visions that exist today are diverse and may be sampled by Langland's *Piers Ploughman*, Wordsworth's *Prelude* among other conventional literary writers. The subject and inspiration of *Inferno* are all conceptualized in the first paragraph of the poem where the author lets the readers know he is about to narrate everything he saw in a vision (Alighieri

2). However, unique to Dante, the author does not talk about some superficial being, but himself. In other contexts, it can be analyzed that Dante speaks of his experiences in the vision as he personally witnessed it.

The subjectivity of this epic is unique when analyzed with other similar literary pieces of his time. For instance, classical poets normally talked about how certain beings sang to them or how certain supernatural forms of man or muses spoke to the authors; however, in Dante's works, the muses are actually Beatrice Portinari and Virgil (Alighieri 3). These two individuals guide Dante throughout the narration and unlike other literary pieces; they do not recite the poem. Some observers note that Beatrice and Virgil actually guide and teach Dante along the way but the author reports on the details of this encounter because he exposes what the two showed him during his trip through hell and the Garden of Eden. However, Beatrice Portinari represents the author's idea of a being with divine wisdom, but at the same time, she is the author's partner in the sharing of courtly love. Dante first set eyes on Beatrice when he was still very young and when she died at the age of 25, Dante was inspired to write a novel about her in one of his works titled: *Vita Nuova* (Gutchess 10).

Nonetheless, *Inferno* was written at a time when the author was working as a municipal officer in the city of Florence, and considering the poem has a lot of reference to religious principles, Christianity acted as the official background to the literary piece; a concept which other poets such as Plato have used in their works (Gutchess 3). This is why Dante's *Inferno*, ought to be openly understood that it was not written as a philosophical work but to enforce religious doctrines. In the same religious context, Dante introduces

Inferno from the religious perception of Catholic's Holy Thursday which is referred in other contexts as "the dark wood period" to signify a timeline just preceding Jesus' crucifixion (Gutchess 3). This background can also be equated to the spring equinox period where the sun shines from the constellation of Aries because in the same setting, Dante travels practically the whole Friday and throughout Saturday with Virgil. Nonetheless, from the religious context, Dante represents a framework of virtues, vices and morality from his personal view on morality and judgment.

Dante's Moral Stand

Dante's stand on morality is represented from his perception of crimes done against God. Dante represents the contravention of God's laws to persecution and agony which are characteristic of hell.

He makes the readers understand that evil is a moral sin and it is regarded just like any type of sin because immorality is in contravention of the will of God; however, in the same regard, it is not possible to judge the will of God. Conversely, Dante lets his readers know that an otherworldly hell would follow his representation of hell. His trip through hell, while in the company of Virgil, represents his allegorical representation of the hierarchy of pain and suffering associated with wrongful acts, and to a large extent, Dante represents the Old Testament teachings on morality and judgment which can be best represented through the "eye to eye" or "tooth to tooth" philosophy.

In this regard, Dante identifies certain moral offenders in Inferno who are depicted as serving punishments that befit the offences they committed, and

in a way that reflects the nature of their sin. For example, Dante equates the moral sin of homosexuality to walking on hot sand. This is Dante's way of pointing out that the moral sin of homosexuality directly befits the punishment of walking on hot sand. Human suffering and subsequent judgment given to those who fail to observe God's instructions is justifiable according to Dante. The type of punishment given for any moral sin does not therefore occur randomly because Dante observes that morality is judged from the most serious offences to the lightest. These variations are represented from Dante's segmentation of hell to suit the different type of moral offenders. In this regard, Trombley (cited in Gutchess 5) notes that: "In Dante's view there are three major divisions of the circles of Hell, populated by those who give into their lesser instincts and desires, those that refuse God, and those that intentionally do harm to themselves or others by physical or deceptive means". In Dante's perception of morality and punishment, it can be analyzed that under the issue of evil and God's will, those who give in to their instincts and desires contravene God's will and attract punishments that befit their moral sin while people who refuse the will of God and those who intentionally do harm to their neighbors, all manifest the levels of punishment and morality.

Virgil is seen as falling in the category of people who don't have enough faith in God and this is why he was unable to guide Dante into the Garden of Eden. To a large extent, this can be seen as his punishment for not having enough belief in Christ. In this regard, it is clearly evident that from Dante's stratification of hell, he is able to show the level of misdeeds which warrants different levels of punishment. Through the same analysis, he is able to

justify his perception of judgment. This explains why Dante comes out as a very perplexed individual; especially in the way he quantifies the degree of punishment. For example, the stratification of hell explains why the moral sin of bribery was considered graver than the sin of murder as represented in the eighth and sixth chronicles of hell. In the same manner, Dante considers acts of violence and murder as graver than acts of fraud. In this example, the greatest moral sin that contravenes God's will is fraud; which goes against God's principles of mankind living in harmony.

On the other hand, murder is in contravention of the love but fraud manifests as the biggest deprivation of love.

Moral Depictions

In *Inferno*, Lucifer is often referred to as Satan and is depicted as the King of *Inferno* because his fall from heaven into earth created hell where he was imprisoned in. Lucifer's multicolored face represents certain negative sentiments of hate, powerlessness, and deceit when contrasted to positive attributes advanced by the holy trinity. The triple aspect character of Satan is also representative of the three-faced aspect of paganism which was severally referred to in the novel. When Lucifer flapped his wings, the tears of the sinners were frozen; meaning that they could not find any relief from their mourning and at the same time, greater populations of those who fell in this category (mourners) were treacherous people. This therefore means that treacherous people were associated with Satan because they deserved the same punishment because of the contravention of God's will.

Lucifer is also the representative being who exposes the importance of the state and the church to harmoniously coexist together because he is seen as the moral punisher of both church and political leaders. To illustrate this, Lucifer is quoted as chewing on Judas Iscariot (Jesus' betrayer), Brutus and Cassius who committed atrocious acts of murder and betrayal; something which ironically Lucifer was supposed to reward them for (Gutchess 16). In the poem, Lucifer is found on the roadway, but in heaven, he is seen as desiring what he cannot have, and in so doing, ignores the will of God. His contravention of the will of God is also the ticket that led to his casting from heaven into hell. Again, the will of God is hereby seen as the benchmark to morality because when Satan went against God's will, when he desired that which he could not have, he was thrown down to hell. In close resemblance to Lucifer is the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church who represented deceit and bribery. Boniface was the ruling pope at the time when Dante was writing his work.

He was the predecessor to Celestine V who abdicated in 1294; afterwards, the corruption and chaos Dante makes reference to, when referring to his town, Florence, began when the pope made a decree that his title as a pope was enough assurance that he had the authority to rule all of Italy. In this regard, he started committing moral sins which later saw his fall from his position as the pope. One of his prominent moral sins was his backing of the Guelphs to take over Florence through the bribery of French military men to assist them. According to Dante's perception of punishment for such atrocious acts committed by a servant of God, he makes reference to the pope as a de facto servant of God who was thrown into hell after he failed to

heed to the rules guiding all servants of God. His destination in hell can be regarded as the punishment for his wrongful deeds on earth. This fact is affirmed in the 8th circle where Dante points out that Boniface had a section in hell especially left for his occupation because of his poor moral example on earth (Gutchess 19). Boniface died in 1318 when Pope Benedict VI took the mantle as the pope of the Roman Church.

Importance of the Church and State's Co Existence

The leopard, lion, and she wolf represent three animals that were a hindrance to Dante's chances of succeeding in Canto 1.

These animals are representative of biblical animals like Daniel's casting into the lion's den and the she-wolf representation of the last days in the book of revelation. Even though Dante avoids naming these animals in complete censorship, they can be analyzed in political terms as representing Florence, France and Papacy. Comprehensively, the leopard that was seen symbolizes Florence city, whereby back in 1300 AD it was deeply divided between the black and white Guelphs. This division is representative of the need of the state and church to coexist together. The blacks can be perceived as proponents of the Pope's quest to rule Italy (which is representative of the church's will), while the White Guelphs were critics of such a move and represented the will of the state to control Florence. In this regard, they were supported by secular leaders. For the sake of their security from the pope; they had to go to extreme lengths to support secular leaders like Dante. Nonetheless, Dante found it difficult to maintain peace between the two factions (in his capacity as a magistrate) and he therefore made enemies from both sides of the divide.

As a resultant measure, he banned all Guelphs, who he thought were causing havoc, and in this process, he also banned his friend Guido Calavcanti too. Unknown to Dante, the blacks came back with the backing of the pope while the novel's narration during the spring of 1300 AD and its writing, three years down the line (when Dante was in exile) gives enough room for Dante to note that the prophecy of his exile was true. The lion symbol represented France as an ally to the Pope; after they were bribed to support the blacks in the Florence conflict.

The king of France thereafter reinstated the black Guelphs in the city of Florence and later tried Dante in his absence and vowed to kill him if he ever returned back into the city. The she-wolf on the other hand represents Rome, which took control of the city of Florence in 1302 (Gutchess 18). During this period, Dante is exiled in an unknown foreign land because he feared for his life; considering he opposed the power of the pope while in Florence.

Nonetheless, the symbol of the she-wolf can be best analyzed to represent Rome in its totality and also as the home of Virgil who happened to be one of the greatest poets of Rome. In the analogy, the wolf is seen as preventing Dante from achieving the highest status of poetry in Rome. Lastly, the Greyhound symbol happens to represent Dante's patron in Verona, through Can Grande Derlla Scalla, although ironically, Can Grande represents a gigantic dog; which may imply that Dante's patron may probably be a domesticated wolf (Gutchess 19). This use of biblical symbols can also be perceived as representative of the need to merge the state and the church since Dante uses them to explain political intrigues.

Interestingly, these political intrigues also determine the biblical destination of some of the key players like the Pope who was sent to hell because of bribery and corruption.

Conclusion

Dante uses many literary techniques such as symbolism, and character casting to best convey his perception of punishment and morality in *Inferno*. The 1300 AD setting of his literary piece and the religious connotation of his poems is a representation of the religious undertones related with morality and judgment. The use of symbols is a more subtle manner of representing controversial opinions and Dante uses them tactfully to let his readers know his trail of thought.

Nonetheless, Dante extensively uses religion (Christianity) to form his opinion on morality and punishment. Tactfully, he also uses his imagination about God's opinion to advance his own opinion of morality and punishment. In this manner, it is difficult for anyone to question his personal ethical system. Nonetheless, he bases his virtues and vices on religion and integrates it with his political experiences to present a belief system that also advances his personal thought. He also integrates the ancient virtues and vices associated with the Roman Empire to reflect on his political beliefs. These attributes therefore outline Dante's framework of virtues, vices and morality in his work.

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