

Inferno – college essay



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Renaissance theologian Dante's "Inferno" invokes a Hammurabic conception of the seven deadly sins and their corresponding punishment. Each sin, punishable by its degree of deviation from God's commandments, is assigned one of the nine levels of hell, which are progressively terrifying, the last, home to Satan. In keeping with the theological suppositions of his time and the aesthetic sensibilities of symmetry and order, Dante's "hell" is very stratified.

Just outside the entrance of hell is The Dark Wood of Error, indicative of the world and worldliness; followed by the Vestibule, which contains those opportunistic individuals who, in life, extended their loyalty neither to God (good) or Satan (evil). These individuals endlessly chase a banner as they run over maggoty ground, stung and pursued by swarms of hornets. Still, this is not yet hell, as the first circle, Limbo, contains the various "virtuous pagans" whose human reason alone did not enable them to see God or heaven, having lived and died outside his grace and mercy, i. e. prior to Christ's incarnation.

Proceeding this level is the second, reserved for the carnal and lustful whose unreasoning passion in life earned their souls eternal passage in Hell's whirlwind. As mentioned, the sins become more abominable and the punishments harsher until Dante and his guide Virgil reach the sixth circle, The City of Dis, which acts as the division between upper and lower hell.

The sins after this point are truly abominable and here it becomes necessary for Christ himself to gain the duo's passage through the city and into the lower levels as human reason is no match for true evil. The fallen angels

reside at the last levels and the worst of sinners on the very last, the ninth. Here resides Satan, in his mouth, a frozen trio: Caesar's slayers Brutus and Cassius alongside Judas Iscariot, betrayer of Christ.

The quartet are frozen in the run-off from all the rivers above, a slush of blood, excrement and sorrow, deep in the bowels of the earth. They rejected love in life and therefore, are furthest from God, their souls locked outside his warmth for all eternity. Dante's conception of hell is symmetrical and orderly, an acknowledgment of the medieval and renaissance great scheme of being. One in which moral aptitude and practice determine eternal salvation or damnation in a Hammurabic scheme where each sin has a corresponding punishment.

Even considered, is the placement of classical figures, reborn and reconsidered during Dante's time, shown outside the grace of God. Yet, they illustrate, via the classical figure Virgil, as his guide, Dante's larger anti-humanistic point: humanity is saved by the grace of God alone. Not by human reasoning (Virgil in Limbo), purposeful moral ambiguity (opportunists in the Vestibule), or the world and worldliness (Dante in the woods). After all, in Dante's "Inferno" the above are things one encounters on the way to hell.