

The ways dante influenced t.s.eliot's works



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T. S. Eliot is considered one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century and his poetry was greatly influenced by Dante Alighieri. Eliot's introduction to Dante was in his college years at Harvard, where he studied philosophy. Eliot read Dante's works extensively in college and may have meant to "apprentice" himself to learn everything he could from the master (Sloane).

Dante's influences on Eliot include appearances by way of direct quotations, similar images, and thematic elements. The direct quotations are simple to find because they are written in Italian, but there are also lines from Dante's works that have been translated and slightly adapted to fit into Eliot's poetry. Dante's images are also prevalent among Eliot's works. Eliot's view of the world as a cold and desolate place was greatly influenced by Dante and his visions of Hell. Similar themes are also apparent; Eliot often uses themes such as isolation from Dante's works to express his own inner feelings. At least one of these three elements can be seen in most of Eliot's works, so it is obvious that Dante influenced Eliot.

The influences from Dante in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" include direct quotations and thematic elements. In "Prufrock" the narrator, Prufrock, seems to be addressing a potential lover. However, Prufrock "knows" too much to simply approach the woman; in his mind he can hear other people's voices mocking and taunting him. Prufrock is very shy about expressing his feelings, and he is only telling us, the reader, under the assumption that no one else will hear him admit to his fear of others judging him. The entire poem is about Prufrock explaining why he cannot express his feelings of love to the woman he admires.

Dante's influence first appears in "Prufrock" as a direct quotation from The Divine Comedy as the first epigraph:

S'io credesse che mia risposta fosse

A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,

Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.

Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo

Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,

Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo. (1-6)

The epigraph literally means, "If I thought my reply were to one who could ever return to the world, this flame would shake no more; but since, if what I hear is true, none ever did return alive from this depth, I answer you without fear of infamy ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T. S. Eliot)." This sets the tone for the rest of the poem; Prufrock can speak his shame only because he thinks no one who hears his confession will condemn him for his cowardice (Drew 827).

Prufrock's fear of humiliation seems to be his own personal Hell; the idea of individuals having their own personal Hell is a thematic influence from Dante. Dante's work, The Divine Comedy, is a compilation of different versions of Hell. In "Prufrock" it is obvious that Prufrock is feeling anguish over his inability to express his love for the woman he admires (Bloom 17). Eliot's frustration appears when he can't decide whether or not to speak to the woman:

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And indeed there will be time

To wonder, " Do I dare?" and, " Do I dare?"

Time to turn back and descend the stair,

With a bald spot in the middle of my hair

[They will say: " How his hair is growing thin!"]. (37-41)

Prufrock is obviously frustrated and is even self-conscious of his bald spot when he is contemplating whether or not to tell the woman he adores how he feels. Prufrock is so concerned about his appearance that even when he is trying to speak to the woman, he can't stop thinking about what others think of him. Prufrock finds his inability to go on with life without worrying what other people think is making him miserable, providing his own personal Hell.

Dante's influence appears again in the form of images and themes in Eliot's " The Wasteland". At the beginning of " The Wasteland" there is a description of a prophetic, apocalyptic journey into a desert waste. Near the end there is a very obscure section where the narrator walks through the streets of London populated by the ghosts of the dead. The narrator meets a ghost and asks him what happens to the corpses in the ground. Part one ends with a famous line from the preface of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, " You! hypocrite lecteur!-mon semblable,-mon frÃ"re!" (76) This quote is accusing the reader of sharing the poet's sins (Martin).

In the following passage from part one, Eliot describes similarities between the crowd and the flow of souls into Hell in Dante's *Inferno*.

Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,

A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,

I had not thought death had undone so many.

Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,

And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (61-65)

These city dwellers are lost and lacking values and damned to Hell for all eternity. The description of London as an "Unreal City" suggests that the corruption within the city cannot be imagined and seems like Hell to Eliot (Bloom 42). Near the end of part one, when Eliot quotes Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal*, the quote implies that the poet and the reader have sinned, thus damning them to Hell. This exemplifies the theme from Dante that each person has sinned and they will go to their own personal Hell.

Dante's influence becomes apparent in part five of "The Wasteland" when Eliot takes an image directly from Dante's *Inferno*. The first half of the section builds to an apocalyptic climax, as suffering people become "hooded hordes swarming" and the "unreal" cities of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London are destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again. The poem ends with seemingly random fragments of children's songs, works from Dante, and works from Elizabethan drama.

Dante's influence in part five expresses the effects of isolation on the mind. In the following excerpt, the image portrayed is taken directly from Dante's *Inferno* where Ugolino, who is damned in the lowest circle of Hell for

treachery, hears the memory of the key turning to lock him and his children in the Hungry Tower to starve to death (Drew 838).

I have heard the key

Turn in the door once and turn once only

We think of the key, each in his prison

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison

Only at nightfall, aethereal rumours (411-416)

Eliot connects this passage with the reality of human isolation and the idea that memories can be painful even if only you can see them and no one else can.

Once again, Dante influences Eliot in the form of descriptive imagery in "The Hollow Men". "The Hollow Men" is an explanation of how the hollow men could not choose their fate, unlike Guy Fawkes, to whom Eliot makes an allusion earlier. Fawkes plotted to blow up England's House of Commons in 1605, but was arrested before he could set off the gunpowder. Fawkes was executed, but he chose his fate, unlike the hollow men who appear to have no control over their final destination. Eliot often mentions different kingdoms where souls are being kept; these kingdoms bear a striking resemblance to Dante's visions of the afterlife in *The Divine Comedy*.

The similarities between the Kingdoms mentioned in "The Hollow Men" and Dante's visions of the afterlife are extremely similar. Death's other Kingdom in "The Hollow Men" relates directly to Dante's *Inferno*, where the violent

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souls go. Eliot's Death's Dream Kingdom, where those who are suffering towards redemption go, is amazingly similar to Dante's Purgatorio. When the hollow men are waiting to cross the "tumid river", the river is analogous to Dante's River Acheron, the river that separates Purgatorio and Inferno. The Kingdom of God is comparable to Dante's Paradiso (Southam 99).

The hollow men are also similar to the souls in Dante's Ante-Hell of Neutrals. The hollow men died without shame, but they were not praised either. The idea of the Ante-Hell of Neutrals is similar to the Catholics' belief that babies who were not baptized don't go to Hell because they haven't committed any sins, but they can't go to Heaven because they have not been resolved of the original sin. Instead these souls go to purgatory. These souls, like the Hollow Men, do not deserve to be recognized as "violent souls" because they have not done anything wrong. The hollow men have "Gathered on this beach of the tumid river" (60) where they will stay because they do not have adequate reasons to be in Inferno or Paradiso. Both of these beings have been forgotten because they were neither good nor evil (Bloom 61).

Dante Alighieri's influences on T. S. Eliot's poetry are excellent examples of Eliot's expressions of emotions through his poetry. Eliot has been accused of stealing many of Dante's ideas, although they appear to be well integrated in Eliot's poetry. It is apparent that Dante has influenced Eliot in the form of direct quotations, similar imagery, and comparable thematic elements.

Works Cited

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