

Analysis of dante's inferno: canto xvi



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Analysis of Dante's Inferno: Canto XVI In the epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, Dante Alighieri paints a vivid picture of hell, purgatory, and heaven while including his own interpretation of society. While looking particularly into the *Inferno*, the reader is given a true insight to the inner workings of Dante Alighieri's mind as he assigns certain punishments to particular sinners from his time period. Dante arranges hell into nine circles and places sinners into each circle based on what evils they took part in when they were alive. In each circle there are different rings, which account for particular sins and their punishments. As Virgil guides the character Dante further into hell, the severity of the punishments increase steadily. The progression of the severity of sins moves from incontinence to violence and then fraudulence. The final circle of hell is designated for the traitors, and the sinners in this section receive the most gruesome punishment. The number three is a reoccurring factor in much of *The Divine Comedy*. For example, there are three sections of the epic poem with each containing 33 cantos. The emphasis of the number three reflects greatly upon Dante's religious standing and shows his great respect to the divine trinity. In Canto XV, Dante becomes familiar with the sodomites who are categorized within sins against nature in Circle VII. Dante and Virgil view the sodomites as they walk through the burning sands. Dante sees Brunetto Latini, who introduced Dante into philosophy in his teenage years and was very important to his overall education (Wilson 67), and chats with him about his beloved city of Florence. It is important to note the extreme respect Dante feels for Brunetto Latini, despite Brunetto's sin and his condition from the fire in this ring of hell. Canto XVI begins as Virgil leads Dante into the third ring of the seventh circle in hell which is still designated for men guilty of Sodom. Dante and Virgil now

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approach an area where the water creates a soft roar as it plummets down to the adjacent circle. It's something like the soft buzzing of a beehive. All of the sudden, a trio of men with a single influence depart from a cluster of suffering souls that are cruising past Dante and Virgil. The trio quickly approaches Dante because they recognize his attire as being from their city-state of Florence that they refer to as debauched. Dante sees the lesions that blanket the three men's extremities. Some of the abrasions are mature, while others are newly acquired by the fire. Even as Dante writes the story he is mournful from the degree of the wounds he saw. The shrieks from the three men quickly catch Virgil's consciousness and he turns to Dante to advise him that the approaching men deserve his reverence. If it were not for the precipitation of fire, Virgil would propose that Dante sprints their way because it would be an appropriate gesture. As Dante and Virgil come to a halt, the trio of men continues with their usual stride. When the three men get close to Dante and Virgil, they each begin to rotate. Each man in the unit forms a spinning wheel. The men are just like professional wrestlers, naked and greased, inspecting one another before the hard blows and punches begin. While the three men spin, their faces are directed toward Dante and each man's collar and feet move in opposite directions. All of the sudden, a man in the group blurts out that if the sorrow among the fruitless sands and the disgusting conditions of the burns on their flesh makes them, and what they inquire, abhorrent to Dante, then Dante should allow their worldly notoriety to convince his heart into telling the trio who he is and how he can journey through hell with blood gushing through his veins. The man talking points out that the man he is following behind, who is naked with his burnt flesh gruesomely flaking off of his body, is of higher nobility than one may

venture to guess. His name is Guido Guerra and he accomplished much through his wisdom and his skill in fighting. Guido Guerra was born in 1220. He was a member of the Conti Guidi, which is an extremely powerful family from Tuscany. In 1266, Guido had a deciding role in the Battle of Benevento and was a restorer of Guelf fortunes in Florence. He died in 1272 (Lansing 461). The man speaking goes on to reveal the identity of the next man as being Tegghiaio Aldobrandi. The man believes that the world would be better off if they would have listened Aldobrandi's wise counsel. Tegghiaio Aldobrandi was a member of the upper-class Adimari, which the most powerful Guelf clan in Florence. IN 1260, he advised fellow citizens against the Sienese Campaign but he ended up being a prominent captain in that very campaign. He died in 1267 (Lansing 13). The man speaking to Dante now introduces himself as being Iacopo Rusticucci. He was a wealthy Guelf and a member of a family with less nobility than the men mentioned before. He was extremely active in 1254, when Florence subdued the Ghibelline cities of Distoia, Siena, and Pisa into a succession. He was next door neighbors with Tegghiaio Aldobrandi and they worked together for Florence on more than one occasion (Lansing 758). Iacopo explains to Dante that his unwilling wife drove him to homosexuality. After hearing about the accomplishments and high nobility of the three men, Dante wants nothing more than to embrace them, but he understands that nothing would be able to shield him from the flames. The fact that Dante was so captivated by the three men that he wanted to put his arms around them has led many to believe that Dante had homosexual desires of his own. Although Dante may have experienced homosexual desires, the difference between him and the men in this canto is the fact that he did not act on them (Durling 559). Dante

believes that even Virgil would allow him to do so, but the fact that Dante would be brutally charred and blistered affects his objective of embracing them. When Iacopo Rusticucci concludes his inquiry and explanation, Dante begins to respond. Dante explains that he does not abhor the men. He feels extreme pity for their awful condition. Dante also expounds that he has felt this great mourning for them as soon as Virgil told him that the men of such great political stature were approaching. He says that he is also from the city-state of Florence and he knows their names and magnificent feats very well. Dante tells the trio that he must journey all the way through the center of hell in order to arrive at the precious fruits that Virgil has promised him. Iacopo Rusticucci responds by saying that he wishes Dante that best and he hopes that he lives long and prospers. When it comes time for Dante to die, he hopes that the legacy Dante leaves behind lives on and will not quickly be forgotten. Iacopo continues by asking Dante if bravery and honor still flourish in their beloved city-state, or if it has been exiled as well. He asks this because Guglielmo Borsiere, a man who has recently been cast into this division of hell has given them news that causes them to mourn over their once strong city-state. Guglielmo Borsiere's exact identity is unknown. Rusticucci associates with him, so it is assumed that he is of high nobility as well. He had just recently died and told the men in this section of hell about the ill fate of Florence (Lansing 125). With his head held high, Dante chants to Florence that a different kind of people with their quick affluence have acted as a catalyst to the production of pride and lack of self-control within the great city-state. The trio of men hears Dante and takes that to be his answer on the current condition of Florence. All at once, they turn to praise Dante for his gift of communicating with such ease. They beg Dante to speak

of them to living men if he makes it out of hell alive. At the conclusion of this statement, the three men break apart from their wheel and scamper off into the distance to continue their relentless suffering. A single word could not be muttered in the time it took for the men to disappear from Dante and Virgil's sight. This is the queue for the two men to continue upon their journey through hell. Dante avidly trails behind Virgil, and before long the loud rumbling of the water makes it impossible for them to hear one another. Dante compares the progression of sound from the Phlegethon Tributary as Dante and Virgil venture deeper into hell with the progression of sound as the Montone River flows through a single catalyst at San Benedetto delle Alpe. The river that flowed down the left side of the Apennine mountain range was the Montone. The upper Montone was called Aquacheta, which literally meant quiet water. The Aquacheta poured into a single waterfall at San Benedetto delle Alpe (Durling 257). Dante is wearing a cord that fastens around his midriff because he once thought he would be able to catch Geryon the leopard. As soon as Dante extracts the cord from his torso, he gives it to Virgil twisted into a coil. This removal of the cord has been interpreted as Dante's own disengagement from the city of Florence. Florence was once highly revered but that respect has diminished due to greed and dishonesty. It is fitting that this removal of the cord happens after he encounters the three important Florentine leaders from his own era because they discussed how the city has gone to ruins (Reynolds 160). When Virgil receives the cord he turns it to the right and casts it deep into the pit of darkness before them. Dante now thinks to himself that something abnormal will surely take place soon. Dante explains that a man must be extremely careful when he is in the company of someone who cannot only

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examine his actions but also comprehend his thoughts. Virgil now explains to Dante that soon the monster will rise as they expect and the image Dante is trying to picture in his head will soon be revealed to his eyes. Dante believes it is always better to keep quiet than to assert a truth that is interpreted as a lie when spoken, because stating the truth has a tendency to be humiliating. Dante chooses to speak up in his Comedy and he promises to the reader that he is telling the truth about the mysterious figure he sees next. It swims through the dense and dreary air, (a sight that would frighten even the bravest souls) like something that has been cut free from the ocean floor it springs to the top. The creature stretches out its arms and doubles up its legs. During Canto XVI, the severity of the punishment of the sodomites is greatly emphasized. The sodomites are represented by males who have had sexual relations with other males. This particular section of hell is categorized as a sin against nature and is intermingled with other sins of violence. Sodomy is considered violence against nature because through homosexuality the sodomites have voluntarily disregarded the true intention of sex which is to generate offspring (Lansing 787). Since a sin against nature represents a direct sin against God himself, the sodomites have to go through an excruciatingly painful punishment. The men in this canto are chastised by being forced to remain in constant motion on sterile sand while fire is raining down upon them (Musa 123). All of the sodomites are in groups of three and they are not allowed to converse with anyone outside of their assigned group. The punishment chosen for the men in this division of hell is actually very fitting. In Dante's hell, all erotic sins are punished with some sort of ceaseless motion. The nonstop motion represents the irritation of their desires and also the unsettledness of their passion. The fire in Canto

XVI is a direct symbol to the heat of their lust, and the sterile sand represents the fact that sexual intercourse between males fails to produce offspring (Lansing 789). Another aspect of this canto that allows the Contrapasso to be comprehended better is the fact that the fire falls rather than rises. By doing this it shows that the fire has been denatured, just as the men have been denatured by having sexual relations with other men instead of women (Durling 559). Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Iacopo Rusticucci were all very prominent Florentine leaders. They accomplished much in their life and were widely respected by the population that they represented. The fact that the men within Canto XVI were so well-renowned and admired, yet at the same time received such a horrible punishment truly reflects the impact religion had on the culture of this time period. Dante may have really respected the men, but he still recognizes the sin they committed as severe because it goes against the rules set forth in the Bible. There are many modern day examples of men that would fit well with this particular group of sodomites in Dante's hell. Alan Turing is a particular man that shows the cultural similarities between Dante's time and the British 1950s. He was a famous war hero who helped crack the German enigma codes during World War II. In 1952, just a short time after his great success, he was convicted of "gross indecency" for having a sexual relationship with another male. Turing received the final ultimatum of either being thrown in prison for his actions or being chemically castrated by the injection of female hormones. He ultimately chose the latter of the two, and just two short years later he ended up committing suicide (Hodges 1). Alan Turing represents a lot of the same things the men in Canto XVI represents. He was extremely well-respected but ultimately was punished severely for

his homosexuality. Barney Frank is a more modern day example and represents the change of culture from Dante's time and also the 1950s. Barney Frank has been a U. S. Representative for Massachusetts's 4th Congressional District since 1981. He is one of the most prominent homosexual politicians in our present day society, and was actually married to his male partner last June. The most important thing to consider when comparing Barney Frank with the men from Canto XVI and Alan Turing is the fact that he has been openly gay since 1984 ("Barney Frank"). This means that Barney Frank has won every election he has been in even now that people know that he is a homosexual. This is a drastic difference in cultural acceptance especially when you consider this to the inhumane treatment of British war hero, Alan Turing. In today's society there are many well-known celebrities and people of high importance, who are openly gay. The men in Canto XVI were so well-respected for their time because they kept their sexual preferences to themselves. The Middle Ages was a time period that held religion to a high regard and many people would have rejected homosexuals as their leaders. The ideology of the current American culture seems to be as long as someone is qualified and good at what they do; they will be respected regardless of their sexual orientation. After reading *The Divine Comedy*, there is no question that Dante Alighieri regarded Virgil to the highest standard possible. Throughout his story, Dante consistently refers to Virgil as his guide and other terms that show just how much he admires and respects him. It is very well-known that Dante Alighieri used Virgil's *Aeneid* as a model for *The Divine Comedy*. Both literary works use many elements of the Homeric epic, such as in-depth similes and epithets. The strongest connection between the two stories lies between the epic

heroes Dante and Aeneas. In the Aeneid by Virgil, Aeneas has a dream and is told by Hector about the attack on his city and he is also given instructions on what to do next. Although Aeneas doesn't listen right away to his natural battle instinct, he eventually does as he is told and creates the new city (2: 520-560). This aspect of the Aeneid correlates really well with how Dante is led by Virgil throughout hell and he eventually has to accept the sins presented to him just as Aeneas accepts the Gods' wishes. For an epic hero, it is very important that they represent their culture very well. Aeneas represents his Roman culture by his religious devotion to the Gods and also his loyalty to his city and family. Dante represents his culture by providing insights on particular people and places throughout The Divine Comedy. The insights he provides on sinners and the types of punishments they receive allow the reader to fully understand how his culture viewed certain things during this time period. When looking at the style of these two literary works and comparing the two epic heroes, it becomes very obvious that Dante modeled Virgil while writing The Divine Comedy. Through Dante Alighieri's masterpiece, many doors have been opened for discussion relating to religion, politics, war, and many aspects of life in general. Specifically in the Inferno, Dante reflects upon many sins and prominent members of society who have been sentenced to eternal agony in hell. The Divine Comedy has become a well-renowned literary work simply for all the Dante covers within the text and all that he leaves up for research and imagination. While researching and reading Canto XVI from the Inferno, it became apparent that there are so many hidden meanings and truths just within a short three page section from the combination of one hundred separate cantos. The research is so important to being able to draw conclusions and fully understand the

meaning behind the style of writing Dante chooses to use. The Divine Comedy is a piece of literature that will continue to be remembered for many years to come, because of the way Dante meticulously sculptured it. Works Cited: Canto XVI Dante's Inferno " Barney Frank." 2012. The Biography Channel website. Nov 29 2012. Web. Durling, Robert, trans. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. By Dante Alighieri. Ed. Robert Durling. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 247-253. Print. Durling, Robert. " Dante and Homosexuality. " The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Ed. Robert Durling. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 559-560. Print. Hodges, Andrew. " Alan Turing 1912-1952." Part 8 - Alan Turing's Crisis. British Dictionary of National Biography, n. d. Web. 29 Nov 2012. Web. Lansing, Richard. Dante's Encyclopedia. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000. Print. Musa, Mark, trans. Dante's INFERNO. By Dante Alighieri. Ed. Mark Musa. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. 122-127. Print. Pinsky, Nicole. " Notes to Canto 16. " The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Ed. Robert Durling. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 254-259. Print. Pinsky, Robert, trans. The Inferno of Dante. By Dante Alighieri. Ed. Robert Pinsky. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994. 161-167. Print. Reynolds, Barbara. Dante: the poet, the political thinker, the man. New York: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2006. 157-160. Print. Wilson, A. N.. Dante in Love. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011. 67-72. Print.