

Dante: the sinner vs. the sin



Often when we set out to journey in ourselves, we come to places that surprise us with their strangeness. Expecting to see what is straightforward and acceptable, we suddenly run across the exceptions. Just as we as self-examiners might encounter our inner demons, so does Dante the writer as he sets out to walk through his Inferno. Dante explains his universe – in terms physical, political, and spiritual – in the Divine Comedy. He also gives his readers a glimpse into his own perception of what constitutes sin. By portraying characters in specific ways, Dante the writer can shape what Dante the pilgrim feels about each sinner. Also, the reader can look deeper in the text and examine the feelings that Dante, as a writer and exiled Florentine, may have felt about his particular characters. Dante shows through his poetry some admiration for certain sinners, as if in life he had reason to respect their actions on earth, only to mourn their souls' fate. In the case of Pier Delle Vigne, it is clear that Dante wishes to clear the name of the damned soul that has been conscripted to hell for the shame of unjust dishonor. At the beginning of Canto 13 we find Dante the pilgrim entering the wood of the suicides. He has grown stronger in will at the sight of each circle of torment, yet he approaches this one with a sense of wonder concerning the meaning of the suffering. Here the trees are black and gnarled, with branches that bear “poison thorns instead of fruit” (l. 6). The souls of suicides will never be productive, presenting even in death, which they hoped would free them, only negativity. Here the pilgrim learns the sinful nature of suicide, it being an aberration of the flesh. In contrast, Dante the writer uses Pier delle Vigne to show that the sinner is not as wicked as the sin. By his noble speech the reader learns that political corruption can damn a man's soul. The punished sinners who suffered death for political

reasons are of paramount importance to Dante. Accordingly, he shows in the suicide's circle of hell the extreme consequences of failure in political life. Pier committed suicide for the shame of losing his favored position as Frederick's counselor. This illustrates the ancient Roman concept of honorable suicide, which protests any unjust action that robs one of reputation. Lines 58 ~~to~~ 61 establish delle Vigne's high ranking position as faithful advisor to Frederick: I am he who held both keys to Frederick's heart, locking, unlocking with so deft a touch that scarce another soul had any part in his most secret thoughts...Dante shows delle Vigne to be a faithful man, that gave up both "sleep and life" to prove his dedication (l. 63). The force that ousted him was Envy, embodied in the men who were anxious to have his place. When Dante writes of envy, "who on Caesar's face/ keeps fixed forever her adulterous stare" he is using the concept of Caesar to show the political manifestation of the vice. The noble speech given by Pier delle Vigne begins strained, as he speaks of his fall from grace in life. By line 72, the courtly style is finished and he can speak from the heart. He swears "by the new roots of this tree" that never was he once unfaithful to his "lord and emperor" Frederick (l. 72 ~~to~~ 74). Here we see Dante's portrayal of the sinner as he means it from a writer's perspective. By changing the tone in which Pier is speaking, the mood of his speech moves from formal recollection to plaintive entreaty. This shift in tone adds to the meaning of the words behind the words: Dante's personal intention. He means to show the utter anguish felt by one that feels unfairly persecuted. In the figure of Pier delle Vigne, Dante represents himself, or any man who has been exiled into disfavor. Just as Frederick II's counselor was exiled from his faithful post, Dante was exiled from his beloved Florence for political reasons. This extends to include

anyone who feels banished from the society they wish to keep. The point is to show how far a man can fall when his opposition assaults his faith in himself. Continuing this thought, Pier delle Vigne was so distraught by his loss of status, he felt it necessary to take his own life. His soul is “in scorn/ and thinking to be free /of scorn in death, made me at last, though just, /unjust to myself” (l. 69-71). Pier delle Vigne felt the only way out of the pervasive agony of shame was through death. He admits that death however has been the greater injustice, as he has betrayed himself. Yet, Dante admires his courage. Dante does make sure to point out that suicide is a sin, but he also outlines the aspects of human nature that can drive a man to sin. He raises the question that there is more than one kind of motivation for suicide, and that often those who are exiled from their preferred society seek further exile, from life, in death. Underscoring this point, Dante concludes the explanation of Pier delle Vigne’s soul with his pilgrim character being overcome with emotion. At Virgil’s prompting, the pilgrim urges Virgil to “question him on my part, /on whatever you think I should do well to hear; /I could not, such compassion chokes my heart” (l. 82-84). Here we see the human element unable to get past feelings of pity and admiration; it is such that Reason, in the form of the guide Virgil, must take over consideration of this soul. Dante therefore suspends judgement. Throughout the *Inferno* the reader develops feelings about the sinner that correspond to notions Dante the writer would have them understand. The suffering of Pier delle Vigne has a dual purpose: both to teach about the sin of taking one’s life, but also to show how the value of one’s own life can still drive one to destroy it. There are many similar conflicts in the *Inferno*. The lesson that must be learned is to balance judgement with compassion, but not let the emotions cloud the

nature of sin. It is important to learn the true path to righteousness, but also important not to miss the many complicated nuances of life along the way. Just as Dante the poet felt conflicting feelings about the sinners he portrayed as damned souls, readers of the inferno should also consider the many different aspects of each character's portrayal.