

Spiritual journeys: dante and st augustine



The individual spiritual journeys of Dante in the Divine Comedy and St. Augustine in the Confessions are quite similar, as each man searches for divine love and grace, and true eternal closeness to God. Both Dante and St. Augustine admired and were heavily influenced by Virgil, the classical Roman poet of the Aeneid, in their writing and works; however, because of their strong Christian faith, Dante and Augustine also make it clear in their autobiographical accounts that Virgil's pagan beliefs cannot receive salvation, or allow the soul to enter heaven after death.

Dante's journey begins with the poet being portrayed as spiritually lost in sin, in the darkness of woods, when a guide is sent to him in the form of the ancient Roman poet Virgil, who represents human reason and wisdom. Virgil tells Dante that the only way out of the darkness is for Virgil to lead him through Hell and Purgatory, in order for Dante to recognize the nature of sin and the consequences of his actions. Once Virgil has guided Dante to the top of Mount Purgatory, where the renunciation and rejection of sin occurs, Virgil tells the Pilgrim that he can no longer accompany him on his final journey to Heaven, because human reason cannot reach the ultimate height of Paradise. Dante is lead instead to Heaven by his beloved Beatrice, who is now living as one of the blessed in the afterlife, and who also symbolizes divine love.

Much like Dante, St. Augustine's journey also begins with his confessions as being spiritually lost, especially in his earlier years as a sinful youth, turning away from God, and preoccupied with only worldly desires and needs of the flesh. St. Augustine implores in Book VI of his Confessions, " Thou hadst made me wiser, yet did I walk in darkness, and in slippery places, and sought

Thee abroad out of myself, found not the God of my heart; and had come into the depths of the sea, and distrusted and despaired of ever finding truth" (Augustine 94). Here St. Augustine talks about the darkness he walked in during his early life, very similar to Dante's struggle and despair in his own dark woods of sin, where Virgil finds him in the beginning of the *Inferno*. St. Augustine describes his spiritual void and emptiness further, stating, "And I perceived myself to be far off from Thee [God], in the region of unlikeness" (134). In this declaration, St. Augustine is associating his many sins with a "region of unlikeness," which causes him to wander aimlessly without direction or purpose, becoming hopelessly lost.

Whereas Dante's descent into Hell in the *Inferno* is both dramatically real and an allegorical representation of his soul's journey towards God, St. Augustine's *Confessions* represents a metaphorical rather than physical journey of the soul, as Augustine searches for divine truth and grace. However, both men view this spiritual descent as necessary in order for the human soul to attain ultimate closeness to God. An example of this is expressed by St. Augustine in Book IV of his *Confessions*, when he states, "Even now, after the descent of Life to you, will ye not ascend and live? But whither ascend ye, when ye are on high, and set your mouth against the heavens? Descend, that ye may ascend, and ascend to God. For ye have fallen, by ascending against Him" (64). Furthermore, according to John Freccero, author of *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion*, "In the spiritual life, one must descend in humility before one can begin the ascent to truth, and in the physical world, according to both Dante and Aristotle, one must travel downward with respect to our hemisphere in order to rise" (74). This spiritual

belief of descending in humility before one can rise again is clearly echoed by both Dante and St. Augustine in their poetic works regarding Christian faith.

Virgil, the pagan Roman poet of the Aeneid, also plays an important role in the autobiographical accounts of Dante and St. Augustine as well. Dante uses Virgil as his guide to illustrate Virgil's supreme human reason and intellect during his journey, as well as emphasizing Dante's heartfelt admiration for the classical Roman poet. However, to demonstrate and make clear his devout and strict Christian beliefs, Dante places Virgil in Limbo, the first circle of Hell, along with other virtuous pagan Roman poets of the past. Dante's placement of Virgil and the other non-Christians is essential, since they can never be allowed to enter Paradise because of their pagan beliefs. Virgil himself understands this divine judgment delivered by God, when he states to the poet Sordello in Canto VII, " I am deprived of Heaven for no fault other than my lack of faith" (Alighieri et al. 56). Dante shows that despite Virgil's moral perfection, he was without faith, and human reason alone can never reach Heaven.

St. Augustine also admired the Roman poet Virgil during his early life, and being a successful teacher of rhetoric, Augustine understood very well a life led by reason. However, he, like Dante, discovers that reason alone is not enough to gain salvation from God, and as a result, was spiritually lost, tormented by temptation and sin. Thus, St. Augustine too realizes it is only when one has true faith in God that eternal salvation can be achieved. As Olson reminds us, " Augustine testifies to how reason puts man on the road toward God, and how it is [only] faith that informs and elevates reason,

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taking it beyond its natural limitations while never being tyrannical or confining in any way. [St. Augustine] summarized this seemingly paradoxical fact in the famous dictum, “ I believe, in order to understand; and I understand, the better to believe” (Augustine’s Confessions).