

Dante inferno essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Thesis statement: In Dante's Inferno, the first part of the Divine Comedy, Dante develops many themes throughout the adventures of the travelers. The Inferno is a work that Dante used to express the theme on his ideas of God's divine justice. God's divine justice is demonstrated through the punishments of the sinners the travelers encounter.

1) Introduction

A. An overview Dante Alighieri's life, writing style and the Inferno

B. Dante Alighieri's life during the torrential times of the Florentine history

C. His writing style not only consisted of some literature firsts, but also his ability to make the reader feel present in the story

2) Main Points: Dante's Inferno enables man to understand that the punishment of the soul is retributive justice assigned by God.

A. Limbo is the circle of virtuous non-Christians

B. In the second circle are all those who act out of lust

C. Sinners of Gluttony are punished in the third circle

D. The seventh circle are those condemned of violence against God, art, and nature

E. The eighth circle with its ten pouches of frauds, panderers, flatterers, and malevolent are punished in divine ways

3) Conclusion: By carefully assessing the journey through Hell, man comes to realize that the appropriateness of the punishment is a reflection of the sin's effects upon the soul.

Abstract

The Inferno is the first part of Dante Alighieri's epic three-part poem, The Divine Comedy. Dante, in the poem develops many themes throughout the adventures of his travelers from political to religious. The Inferno is a work that Dante used to express his ideas of God's divine justice. It is a horror story we can read from the safety of our armchair, just as the characters, like someone playing a virtual-reality game, wanders through every scene unscathed.

Dante Alighieri was born to a middle-class Guelph family during the Middle Ages in Florence, Italy. It was a volatile time in Florence's history. At a very young age, Dante exhibited great artistic skill and became an acclaimed poet. Dante was active in the political and military life of Florence as well. He served in the military as a youth and held several important positions in the Florence government. His predominance in the political arena resulted in his lifetime exile from Florence.

While in exile, his reputation as an acclaimed poet was solidified with the writing of The Divine Comedy. The political and religious undertones aside, it is a literature masterpiece. Dante introduced his invention of the terza rima, or three-line stanza. Another literature first, was he used himself as one of the characters. This enabled him to tell the story in first person, thus providing an entirely different perspective to literature at that time.

<https://assignbuster.com/dante-inferno-essay-sample/>

The Inferno is a depiction of Dante's journey through Hell and its nine circles. He comes to realize that each circle he enters into represents a greater sin, which, in turn, is followed by a greater punishment. Dante sees the punishments as symbolic retribution: either they are similar to the sin committed or they are opposites. The basis of the Inferno is contrapasso, the idea of a punishment that fits the sin committed. This is how Dante interprets God's divine justice.

The Inferno: Dante's Reflection of God's Divine Justice

From the beginning of human history, there have always been sinners, and people have tried to give just punishments to them. Dante's Inferno suggests clear thoughts on the appropriate punishments for a variety of sins. The sinners are punished either by guards or by some kinds of divine power, and each penalty relates symbolically to their sins. Some directly reflect what they had done in their lifetime, while others are totally the opposite. These two methods of symbolically describing the penalties aid Dante's readers in picturing God's divine justice.

Dante Alighieri, one of the greatest poets of the Middle Ages, was born in Florence, Italy on June 5, 1265. He was born to a middle-class Florentine family. At an early age, he began to write poetry and became fascinated with lyrics. Dante served his native Florence as soldier and statesman. The city-state was divided at the time into Guelphs—the party of the pope—and Ghibellines—the party of the Holy Roman Emperor. The Alighieris belonged to the former party until they were driven out in the late 1200s.

The Guelphs assumed power but split themselves up into Whites and Blacks, the Whites taking the antipapal position of the Ghibellines. Dante eventually cast his lot in with the Whites. When the Blacks seized power in Florence in 1302, they condemned him to death, forcing him to leave his wife, Gemma Donati, and their four children in his beloved native city for the rest of his life. Dante spent most of his time in exile writing new pieces of literature (Siegal). It is believed that around 1307 he stops work on *Convivio* to begin *The Comedy* (later known as *The Divine Comedy*). He completed it shortly before he dies in 1321. *The Divine Comedy* is recognized as his greatest literature accomplishment not only for the multitude of themes and literature firsts, but also for the beauty of his writing style.

With his writing style and the implementation of some literature firsts, Dante assured his name in history. His mastery of language, his sensitivity to the sights and sounds of nature, and his infinite store of information allow him to capture and draw the reader into the realm of the terrestrial Hell. His vast store of knowledge of Greek mythology and the history of his society assists Dante in the creation of his own writing style. Dante uses characters from Greek mythology in the punishing of the sinners. In Canto VI, Dante introduces the vicious monster, Cerberus and details his grotesque features to the reader. He states, “ His eyes are red, his beard is greased with phlegm, / his belly is swollen, and his hands are claws / to rip the wretches and flay and mangle them” (1724). This quote vividly depicts the man-beast Cerberus that Dante encountered, and allows the reader to feel present in the scene with Dante.

Dante writes in the first person so the reader can identify and deeply understand the truths he wishes to share about God's divine justice and man's relation with the Creator. It was the first time in the history of imaginative literature that an author had placed himself at the center of his tale, and the poem endures as not only the first but also the most effective epic of the self (Siegal).

In this work, Dante also introduces his invention of the terza rima, or three-line stanza as well as himself as a character. The terza rima is a verse form composed of iambic tercets (three line groupings) or tertiary rhyme. This rhyme scheme is seen in the fact that every other line rhymes with each other (aba bcb cdc). This type of stanza is called *terzine*, or tercets. Finally, the metrical unit of verse used is termed hendecasyllabic line. The accent falls on the tenth syllable in this eleven-syllable line. The rhyme at the end of the second line of each tercet is used as the way to link the stanzas. Dante claimed to dislike translations. His use of the Terza rima enforced that emotion "...the terza rima, the Divine Comedy's interlocking rhyme scheme, does not work in English" (Greenlaw). With the terza rima and his unique writing style, Dante was able to present in *The Inferno* his idea of God's divine justice, *contrapasso*.

The basis of Dante's opinion of God's divine justice in *The Inferno* relies on the idea of *contrapasso*, the idea of a punishment that fits the sin committed. As Dante travels through hell, every different circle has a different type of punishment depending on the severity of the crimes against God. He believed that the afterlife was a reflection of what people prepare in this life, thus the torments in hell reflect their sins and exemplify God's

divine justice (Scartazzini 24). Dante also uses real characters to aid the readers understanding the description of the sins and punishments in the story. Dante describes Hell in a spiral form with nine circles of different types of sinners. The first circle they enter is Limbo, which consists of heathens and the un-baptized, who led decent lives. The second through the fifth circles are for the lustful, gluttonous, prodigal, and wrathful. The sixth circle is where heretics are punished. The seventh circle is devoted to the punishment of violence. The eighth is devoted to those guilty of fraud and the ninth for those who betrayed others. In the last section, Satan remains imprisoned in a frozen lake.

In the first circle, Limbo, there are virtuous non-Christians who were never baptized or were born before Christ. In this canto, Dante addresses one of the great moral problems of Christianity, which was particularly pressing for Renaissance scholars who revered the Ancients. The people in this circle did not do anything wrong. The only thing, for which they are accountable for, is that they did not know Jesus Christ. Dante solves this problem by keeping the good Pagans and infidels in Hell, but giving them a painless and honorable fate. That is why there is no agony, no guard, and no punishment: “there was no outcry louder than the sighs that causes the everlasting air to tremble. The sighs arose from sorrow without torments” (1717).

The second circle of Hell is the sin of Lust. In this level, all those who act out of lust are condemned. People in the second ring committed love related sins. Cleopatra is there and Helen of Troy as well. Sinners in this circle are punished by being whirled around forever in a gale: “Their hellish flight of storm and counterstorm through time foregone, sweeps the souls of the

damned before its charged” (1721). This punishment stands for the passion of love. When somebody is in love, that person loses control, just like when a hurricane comes. He or she does not care about anything preventing their love, just as a hurricane does not care what it destroys.

The next circle contains the gluttonous, and guarded by Cerberus, the three-headed Hellhound. Dante represents sinners in this circle by using a dog figure. Usually dogs get greedy before their meal, and they can even get angry when somebody tries to take their food. It seems that Dante uses the ancient philosophy of punishment: an eye for an eye. The sinners here wallow in the mud while a constant torrential downpour of rain, sleet, and snow falls on them. Their wallowing in the mud represents the living conditions of greedy animals such as pigs while the constant heavy downpour suggests endless. These punishments are not only a reflection of the sins themselves, but are more than that. They were also, “...revealed truth of the hereafter... To deny this would be to make the poet...a materialist of the nineteenth century” (Scartazzini 22). A materialist, Dante was not. His view on Hell was one of continuation.

The Seventh circle of Hell was devoted to those who were violent against God, art, and nature. Dante meets Brunetto Latini, his mentor while on Earth. Dante realized after some discussion with Brunetto that he was punished for committing violent sins against human nature, specifically, performing homosexual acts, which clearly went against God’s will. The sodomites, like the lustful, have allowed themselves to become powerless to their sexual appetite. However, Dante places these sinners in the seventh circle of hell,

which is reserved for the violent; it is considered violent because it is a perversion of nature.

The practice of homosexuality is recognized as an unnatural sin. The natural motion of the soul is constant ascension, in which the ends bring the soul to be one with god. Dante's vision of God's punishment for this sin is to run in an endless circle in such manner that their necks and feet moved constantly in opposite directions. The circling motion made by the sodomites represents the unnatural movement of the soul; instead of a constant ascension to salvation, the soul makes the constant motion of a circle. The result being that there is no progress in any direction and an unnatural alignment in the body.

In the eighth circle, there are ten pouches of different sins. The circle of the malevolent holds the sinners who have led others to sin in life. These sinners reflect closely to the devil, or the diabolical agents of the devil, who does harm and seduces others to sin. Because the sinner uses its voice in life to seduce another to sin, Dante has God take it away forever in Hell like the one he suggests in the bible. The direct contrapasso to the sin is in the removal of the eyeballs. Because the sinner lacks real reason to his act, he is blind and therefore cannot and should not see.

Not all sinners' punishments reflect their sins; some punishments are the opposite of the crimes committed. In the second and third pouches of the eighth circle where the panderers, seducers, and flatterers are, Dante creates a more realistic punishment. He describes flatterers with humor. Dante locates flatterers in a ditch that is filled with dung: " I saw long lines of

people in a river of excrement that seemed the overflow of the world's" (1769). Usually flatterers use all sweetness. However, in this place, exactly opposite image is used. Flatterers are confined in the most dirty and disgusting place of all and they flounder to escape. The images that Dante uses here oppose their worldly existence to that of flatterers: " He was so smeared with shit...scratching herself with dungy nails" (1769).

In Canto XX, fortunetellers get punished. Their necks are twisted so that their face faces backwards, they can only walk slowly because " for the face was reversed on the neck, and they came on back wards, staring backwards at their loins" (1774). They also cannot make any sound. These images, like those of the flatterers, stand for the opposite of the sinners' behavior in their lifetime. They were always telling people that they could see ahead; they were the people who could foresee things. Now they are undoing what they had done in the world.

Whether these people were deserving of the punishment they received from God is debatable, but Dante believed they got what they deserved. Every sin that can be committed on Earth has its counterpart in Hell as a punishment. Salvatore Quasimodo reflects this by saying; " We already know the disgust felt by the poet when he sees the third infernal river run where the ' horrible art of justice' is at work..." (32). This horrible art of justice is just that, God's divine justice. All through the entire work, Dante never falters in relating this idea throughout the Inferno. This is the true meaning of God's divine justice; people will reap what they sow.

Works Cited

<https://assignbuster.com/dante-inferno-essay-sample/>

Alighieri, Dante. “ The Divine Comedy, Inferno.” Rpt. in *The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. Ed. Mack Maynard. New York: W W Norton & Company, 1995. 1703-1829.

Greenlaw, Lavinia. “ Going Underground. (The Inferno of Dante Alighieri)” *New Statesman*. July 29 2002. 2 Feb 2004.

Quasimodo, Salvatore. “ Ancient Poets,” in *The Poet and the Politician and Other Essays*, translated by Thomas Bergin and Sergio Pacifici, Southern Illinois University Press, 1964, p 46-108. Rpt in *World Literature Criticism Supplement 1*, ed. Polly Vedder, Gale press, New York, 1997.

Ralphs, Sheila. *Dante’s Journey to the Centre: Some Patterns in his Allegory*, Manchester University Press, 1972, p 63. Rpt in *World Literature Criticism Supplement 1*, ed. Polly Vedder, Gale press, New York, 1997.

Scartazzini, G. A. “ On the Congruence of Sins and Punishments in Dante’s Inferno” translated by Thelka in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. XXII, Nos. 1&2, January & April, 1888, p 21-83. . Rpt in *World Literature Criticism Supplement 1*, ed. Polly Vedder, Gale press, New York, 1997.

Siegal, Lee. “ Out of the dark wood: Dante and the subversive ego” *Harper’s Magazine*. May

2002. 2 Feb. 2004.