

On Reading *The Inferno*:
A Theme of Sin, A Question of Punishment,
and a Fainting Dead Away

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Introduction

Within the province of Western cultures, and more specifically, among those cultures bearing historically an inherent Judeo-Christian basis of morality in the governance of its people, we see a profound concern for definitions of sin and prescriptions of appropriate punishment. Stemming from the opening verses of the Bible, and seen in nearly every episode in both its components, The Old (the Judaic *Torah*) and New (Christian) Testaments, the reader can witness the mechanism of how sin is dealt with, more often than not by an angelic agent or by God Himself, summarily dispatching the justice called for in the determined tenets of the belief system. “Eye-for-an-eye” (*Torah*, Leviticus 24-20) is one such formidable precept, or to be more exact, punishment, which has a perverse link with another edict, in that one is to ‘do unto others as he would have them do unto him.’ (*New Testament*, Luke 6:31) All in all, we, as Westerners, have prescribed for us a foundation of morality and ethics that is meant to range through our lives, our culture and, some would say, lead us to heaven.

Indeed, such a matrix of faith and doctrine has served as a fertile ground for authors, thinkers and artists ever since such tenets had become major teachings and parameters — for thousands of years. Western philosophy is based on these ideals, and how we deal with sin and punishment has been a perpetual theme in Western thought.

Dante’s Time and Place

One such formidable thinker and author was an Italian named Dante Alighieri, who lived from 1265-1321, during the European Middle Ages. At that time, all aspects of one’s life were strictly governed by such a set of morals that dictated what was a sin, and how it ought to be dealt with; the authority was directly tied to the Roman Catholic Church. (Sayers) Religious belief was the fundamental authority of city life, personal life,

and of course spiritual life. As such, there was no separation between church and state; it functioned as a holistic entity by which all laws were legislated and executed. The Church *was* the government, and vice versa.

So how was the common man, and particularly the common thinking man, to determine his place in such a society, and more importantly to him then, how could he project his fate after death? The common Christian belief¹ was that, after one's death, the soul would leave the body and go to one of three places: hell, purgatory, or heaven (paradise). If one died as an unredeemable sinner (having committed a mortal sin), his soul was relegated to hell where it dwelt, suffering for eternity. However, if there had been sinfulness but the soul could be redeemed (a venial sin), it was sent to purgatory where, through a series of trials, penance and reflection, it might achieve a higher station toward heaven, and perhaps would eventually enter heaven—paradise—itsself. Only the rare, unblemished souls, the truly good, could hope to enter that highest point, and to dwell for eternity beside the so-called Light of God.

Dante is best known for his trilogy, *The Divine Comedy (Commedia)*, and the three parts are divided into Inferno (hell), Purgatory, and Paradise (heaven). In a way, *The Commedia* is a journal of his travels through each of these places, and as we read of this journey, we learn about sins, virtues, and the justice pertinent to each. And we also learn about their geographical structures, which comprise great significance.

For example, in the first book called *The Inferno*, his travels into hell take us downward through nine distinct circles; each one designates a particular mortal sin as was regarded during Dante's time².

Although a great deal has been written on Dante's work, it would be of interest to consider just a small part of *The Inferno*, and specifically, to look at an incident or episode that may provide some insight into the greater scope of his trilogy. In particular, we will be able to see how Dante's personal life may have projected onto how he regarded 'sin'.

The books are divided into *cantos*, or sets of verses. Dante writes from the first-person voice or narrative, and at the outset of Canto I of *The Inferno*, he declares that he has become lost halfway through his life, lost in the woods. (Note that Dante's original Italian appears to the left of H.W. Longfellow's English translation.)

¹ It should be noted that the term 'Christian' refers here to Catholicism (as opposed to Protestantism), which dominated Dante's life and thought.

² See Fig. 1 for a complete list of these mortal sins and a portrayal of the Circles ascribed to them.

Canto I (*excerpt*)

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, ché la diritta via era smarrita.	Midway upon the journey of our life I found myself within a forest dark, For the straightforward pathway had been lost.
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Of particular note is that Dante has used the phrase “nostra vita,” our life, and not only his life. By this device, we might see that he is drawing us into the narrative, and providing us with a universal consideration of how we are to live *our* lives. (Mazzota) So in his own middle age (Dante was 35 years old when he penned these words), he finds himself lost³.

A Theme of Sin

Dante soon finds himself entering the realm or geography of The Inferno, or hell; and guided by the Roman poet Virgil, he travels in a downward spiral, always moving to the left.⁴

One particular section that bears examining is the episode that takes place in Canto V. This concerns the 2nd Circle, depicted by the Sin of Lust (see Fig. 1). Dante sees that a young adulterous woman, Francesca, and her lover Paulo, are caught in a whirlwind, carried past each other. But they can never come together, and such is their punishment for eternity. We can see how relevant the punishment is to the sin: the wind of desire allows them to approach, but then promptly whirls them away before they can ever touch.

The canto actually stems from real life. Francesca (Francesca di Rimini of Florence, 1255-1285) was forced into a “marriage of convenience” with Gianciotto Malatesta. But she fell truly in love with Gianciotto’s brother,

³ Thus a question arises: why does Dante become lost now, when his youth ought to have provided him with a set of experiences that would help him know how to travel life’s journey? One answer may be biographical: at that time, Dante was exiled from his city of Florence because of political problems, and as such, he found himself without a home. But it also may be due to what we now call a mid-life crisis.

⁴ In Dante’s *Commedia*, one always moves leftward down the spiral in Hell (towards Satan), and towards the right (towards God) along the upward spiral in Purgatory and Paradise.

Paulo (Paolo Malatesta). They would read to each other, secluded together in the garden. While reading the story of Lancelot and his illicit love affair with King Arthur's Queen Guinevere⁵, they became so caught up in the passion of the love they were reading about that they turned to each other, embraced, kissed, and were caught by Francesca's jealous, enraged husband Gianciotto, who promptly killed them both.

In Canto V, we see how Dante learns of their fate, and also how cruel it seems to him, that such "turtle-doves" were taken from their "sweet sighs," and must dwell in such misery that only Hell can mete out. In fact, we see how overcome Dante is in their fate as he weeps, and then faints dead away from heartbreak. Here, at the 2nd Circle of Hell, he is speaking to the poet Virgil, his guide. Dante calls up the image of the lovers 'being upon a wind so light,' as an apt metaphor for the youthful love from which the penitents were forced to suffer:

And I began: "O Poet, willingly
Speak would I to those two, who go together,
And seem upon the wind to be so light."

And, he to me: "Thou'lt mark, when they shall be
Nearer to us; and then do thou implore them
By love which leadeth them, and they will come."

Soon as the wind in our direction sways them,
My voice uplift I: "O ye weary souls!
Come speak to us, if no one interdicts it."

Just as the wind whirls them about as birds caught in a maelstrom, Dante again calls up the figurative terms 'turtle doves' and 'sweet nest' with their 'affectionate appeal':

As turtle-doves, called onward by desire,
With open and steady wings to the sweet nest
Fly through the air by their volition borne,

So came they from the band where Dido is,

⁵ The reader is encouraged to read Mallory's *Morte d'Arthur* (アーサー王物語 / トマス・マロリー著)

Approaching us athwart the air malign,
So strong was the affectionate appeal.

As the wind has abated for the moment, Dante finally gains the chance to listen to Francesca's tragedy:

"O living creature gracious and benignant,
Who visiting goest through the purple air
Us, who have stained the world incarnadine,

If were the King of the Universe our friend,
We would pray unto him to give thee peace,
Since thou hast pity on our woe perverse.

Of what it pleases thee to hear and speak,
That will we hear, and we will speak to you,
While silent is the wind, as it is now.

Sitteth the city, wherein I was born,
Upon the sea-shore where the Po descends
To rest in peace with all his retinue.

Note how Dante has begun each of the next three verses, in the voice of Francesca, with the same word 'Love,' almost as an hypnotic chant that ends with the explanation of what had condemned them:

Love, that on gentle heart doth swiftly seize,
Seized this man for the person beautiful
That was ta'en from me, and still the mode offends me.

Love, that exempts no one beloved from loving,
Seized me with pleasure of this man so strongly,
That, as thou seest, it doth not yet desert me;

Love has conducted us unto one death;
Caina⁶ waiteth him who quenched our life!"

⁶ Caina is a city named after the biblical Cain (first child of Adam and Eve), who slew his brother Abel out of envy after God showed appreciation for Abel's sacrificial offering but not Cain's (Bible, Genesis 4:1-17). Cain later built a city that

These words were borne along from them to us.

Dante becomes distraught with their punishment, although he has yet to learn of the nature of their sin:

As soon as I had heard those souls tormented,
I bowed my face, and so long held it down
Until the Poet said to me: "What thinkest?"

When I made answer, I began: "Alas!
How many pleasant thoughts, how much desire,
Conducted these unto the dolorous pass!"

Then unto them I turned me, and I spake,
And I began: "Thine agonies, Francesca,
Sad and compassionate to weeping make me.

But tell me, at the time of those sweet sighs,
By what and in what manner Love conceded,
That you should know your dubious desires?"

He hears from Francesca the very punishment they will suffer for eternity—to recall forever her happiness, in this grief:

And she to me: "There is no greater sorrow
Than to be mindful of the happy time
In misery, and that thy Teacher knows.

But, if to recognise the earliest root
Of love in us thou hast so great desire,
I will do even as he who weeps and speaks.

Now he learns of the cause, and the effect, of their fate:

One day we reading were for our delight

for certain Christian theologians, notably Augustine (*City of God*, book 15), represented the evils of the earthly city. In this Circle of the Lustful, Francesca identified her husband, who murdered her and Paolo, as a future and punished inhabitant of Caina. (Raffa)

Of Launcelot, how Love did him enthrall.
Alone we were and without any fear.

Full many a time our eyes together drew
That reading, and drove the colour from our faces;
But one point only was it that o'ercame us.

When as we read of the much-longed-for smile
Being by such a noble lover kissed,
This one, who ne'er from me shall be divided,

Kissed me upon the mouth all palpitating.
Galeotto was the book and he who wrote it.
That day no farther did we read therein."

Francesca calls her book a "Galeotto," referring at one level to the "go-between" Sir Galahad who, in the romance the lovers have read, brings Lancelot and Guinevere together. In Dante's interpretation, the "Galeotto" is a go-between because the book has inserted itself between literature and life, and "led them to the guilty act." (Cotterill) Dante is then tragically overcome with grief at their fate:

And all the while one spirit uttered this,
The other one did weep so, that, for pity,
I swooned away as if I had been dying,

And fell, even as a dead body falls.

A Question of Punishment

And so Dante, a mortal being, a visitor to Hell, after hearing such a sorrowful tale, faints as if dead himself. It is a remarkable moment in *The Inferno* and indeed in all of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in that of all the tales of sin and punishment he hears during his long travels, it was this murder and condemnation of two young lovers that brought him to the ground in a swoon 'for pity.'

This unique moment in so momentous a work points to a very real aspect of Dante's own life. And that is his great love, Beatrice, whom he had known since they were children in Florence, with whom he had later

fallen deeply in love, but who was denied to him because of the custom and family politics of the times. He subsequently married another, but in his heart, throughout his life, he had kept a consuming, passionate love alive for his Beatrice, who would later appear appropriately enough as his guide as a divine soul in the volumes Purgatory, and finally, Paradise⁷. One can readily see how the fate of Francesca and Paulo had become Dante's own heartbreak.

Was his description of their fate an indication of Dante's own indignation of such a punishment? Adultery was, indeed, seen by the Roman Catholic Church as a mortal sin. Could he be intimating that, in fact, the sin was nevertheless unworthy of such a price, and questioning that it was even a sin at all? Keeping in mind Dante's own exile from his city of Florence, coupled with the denial given to him of Beatrice's love, one might readily see the allegorical parallels. It was an especially difficult paradox, and indeed a struggle, for Dante, in light of his own strong Catholic faith.

Francesca and Paulo, the two young lovers who seem to have found true love in their brief mortal lives, had been murdered, and must suffer eternally for that love. Their real punishment in Dante's eyes is to be denied happiness... for eternity.

⁷ In the corresponding Canto V of Dante's *Paradise*, it is significant to note that this ring is called "Compensation for Broken Vows," and Dante's love, Beatrice, is his guide. She "answers Dante's questions concerning compensation for broken vows." (Huse 350) It is a direct line to Canto V of the *Infèrno*: the theme relates to infidelity, or the vows Francesca broke through her adulterous affair with Paolo. (It is well-known that Dante makes such connections between each corresponding canto number throughout his trilogy.)

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Further Study for the Reader

The reader is encouraged to consult these additional sources for a deeper understanding of this topic:

- Augustine, Marcus Dods, and Thomas Merton. *The City of God*. New York: Modern Library, 1950. Print.
- Malory, Thomas. *The Morte D'Arthur*. Cambridge: Brewer, 2013. Print.
- Watch a dramatic reading of Canto V, in the original Italian, by Vittorio Gassmann:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=Q5er_13VDtw
- A site housed at Leeds University (England), *The Leeds Centre for Dante Studies*. They offer podcasts, scholarly texts, blogs, and an extensive resource for background study of Dante's work:
http://www.leeds.ac.uk/arts/info/40009/leeds_centre_for_dante_studies/
- Giuseppe Mazzota's inspiring series of lectures on *The Commedia*, with course materials accessible online at Yale University's site (<http://oyc.yale.edu/italian-language-and-literature/ital-310>), and course video and audio available at iTunesU. One may also wish to read Prof. Mazzota's other publications, including *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979. Print.

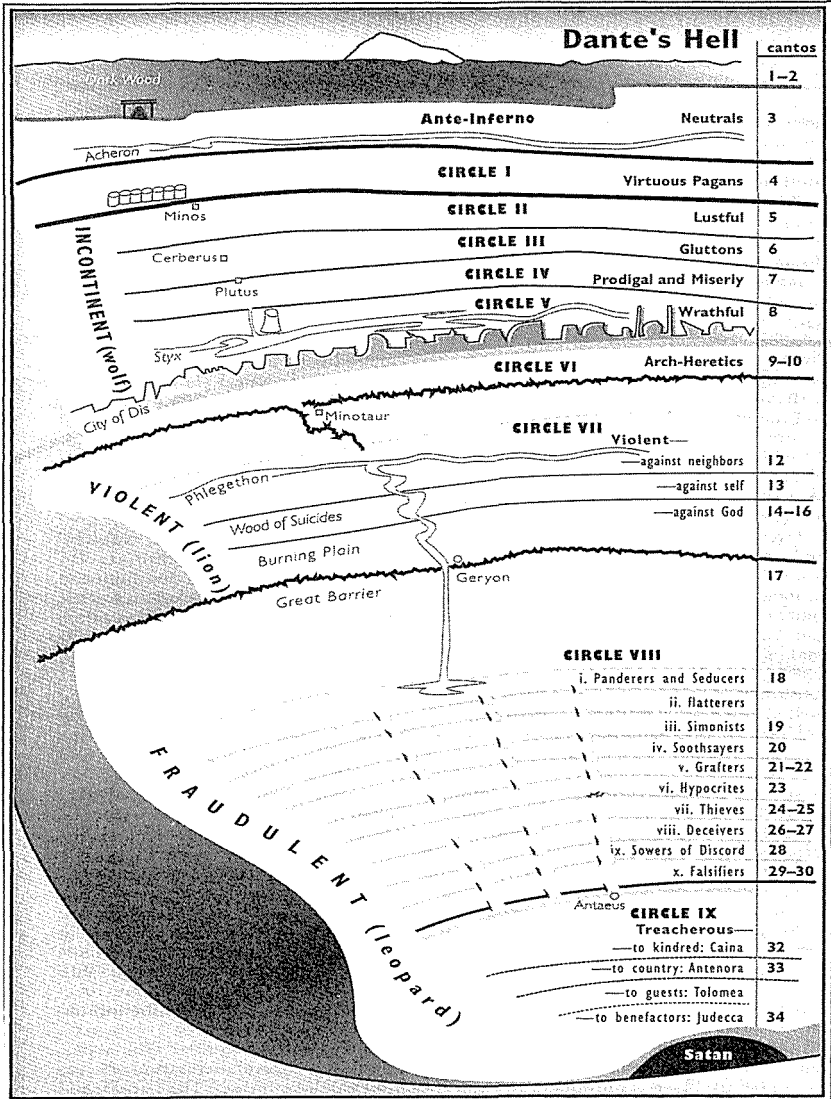


Fig. 1 Map of Dante's Inferno (Fleming)

(岩手大学教育学部英語教育科)