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The American University in Cairo  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences

**Confronting Life in Literary Guises:  
A Study of Dante, Blake and Sartre**

A Thesis Submitted to  
The Department of  
English and Comparative Literature  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts

**Sherine Elsherif**

Under the supervision of

**Dr. William Melaney**

**March 2016**

The American University in Cairo

**Confronting Life in Literary Guises:**

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Has been approved by

Dr. William Melaney

Thesis Committee Advisor \_\_\_\_\_

Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Stephen Nimis

Thesis Committee Reader \_\_\_\_\_

Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Justin Kolb

Thesis Committee Reader \_\_\_\_\_

Affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dept. Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dean of HUSS

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to examine the notion of realism as discussed by Erich Auerbach in his two critical works, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* and *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. My interpretation of Auerbach is applied to Dante's *Inferno*, cantos V, X and XXXIII, William Blake's companion poems, "The Chimney Sweeper" I and II, in *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* and Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist play, *No Exit*. In addition, Blake's illustration of these three cantos from Dante's epic will be examined to clarify how Blake's poetics harmonized or clashed with that of Dante. The works of both Dante and Sartre take place in Hell, thus providing us with comparable versions of literary realism. Realism in this sense is subjective, psychological and personal; it pertains to the reality of a person's essence and how, even in the afterlife, a person can retain his or her own character. Similarly, Blake's poems demonstrate how a certain conception of the life after death is envisioned by the chimney sweeps. Their inability to appreciate the possibility of renewed existence demonstrates how literary realism can relate a failure in insight to a sense of closure. While examining important works by all three authors, the thesis expands on the usual meaning of literary realism to show how spiritual truths pertain to matters of life and death, public experience and personal morality.

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## **Introduction:**

### **Literature and the Life After Death**

More often than not, literature is assumed to adopt human life as its main subject matter. However, what does it mean to say that life and literature go together? Can life be represented in the literary work in various ways? The concept of life in literature is almost always assumed to be the same as the time that a person spends on earth before death, which some believe to be the end of man's existence and the end of life. But in monotheistic religions, including Christianity, life on earth is a mere phase of being in human existence. Life thus could be said to embrace a sphere of being that lies outside of its earthly state. Life in this case could be bound to the essence of the soul as what runs through life in this world and life in the hereafter. Simultaneously, the notion of reality could be said to encompass all of the possibilities that are contained in any form of life.

We must distinguish life as first-hand experience, the reality of the person represented in literature, and, finally, the thoughts of the reader concerning the text. A life can comprise a multitude of layered realities, all of which are subjectively true and would fit as many representations. This thesis is concerned with works that are impacted by the tenets of literary Realism, which is defined in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms* as “a manner and method of picturing life as it really is, untouched by idealism or romanticism . . . [that] relies on specific details to interpret life faithfully . . . psychological in its approach to character, presenting the individual rather than the type” (163, 164). According to this definition, depiction of reality could, therefore, include the depiction of the afterlife.

From this standpoint, it is intriguing to study how literary figures express their understanding of the afterlife. The authors in this study link various ideas of the afterlife to their

way of thinking, be it religious or philosophical. Many literary figures and scholars handled the topic of the afterlife as the second phase of human existence. Among these figures is Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), the Florentine poet, who renders his own perception of the afterlife in *Inferno* as a symbolic journey of the soul in which the protagonist seeks to be united with the divine. Dante's imaginative depiction of the afterlife is derived from his own profound belief in Christian doctrine. Another important figure who touches upon the topic of life after death is the English poet, William Blake (1757-1827), whose radical ideas distinguish him from his contemporaries. Moreover, French philosopher and playwright, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), approaches the afterlife from his own existentialist philosophy. These authors show us the infinite possibilities of expressing existence after death.

The German scholar, Erich Auerbach, demonstrates strong critical interest in a type of Realism that focuses on the essence of a person; however, this conception is not fundamentally tied to the imitation of everyday life in a prosaic setting. Auerbach argues that there is a type of Realism that emerges in imaginative texts such as Dante's *Inferno*, which he discusses in his masterful study, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, and in his special study, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*. Auerbach states in the former work that though in Hell, the characters present in *Inferno* "are frankly represented in all the humble realism of their spheres of life"; and in not specifying which life, Auerbach proclaims the reality of the afterlife, freeing it from its exclusive ties to earth (Auerbach 184).

The aim of this thesis is to explore an approach to Realism as proclaimed in *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* that "treats of earthly reality in its true and definitive form; but palpable and concrete as this reality is, it takes on an ethereal dreamlike quality in the Other World," a reality that is profound because of its authenticity, yet one that does not abide to common definitions

(Auerbach 172). We will be examining a type of Realism that transcends earthly places and characters as discussed in Auerbach's reading of Dante's epic poem, *Divine Comedy, Inferno*, Cantos V, X and XXXIII. After discussing Dante, I will examine the relate the notion of the afterlife in Auerbach to William Blake's two poems, "The Chimney Sweeper" I and "Chimney Sweeper" II<sup>1</sup>, while also considering his illustrations of Dante's *Inferno*. Finally, I will use the idea of the afterlife to explore the ethical implications of Jean Paul Sartre's play, *No Exit*.

Auerbach's analysis of Dante's *Inferno* provides the basis from which the arguments in this thesis stem. Through his reading of *Inferno*, Auerbach bridged the gap between the dead and the living. This way of thinking could be summed up in his statement on Dante in *Mimesis* arguing that "the comedy among other things is a didactic poem of encyclopedic dimensions . . . a literary work which imitates reality and in which all imaginable spheres of reality appear: past and present, sublime grandeur and vile vulgarity, history and legend, tragic and comic occurrences, man and nature; finally, it is the story of Dante's—i.e., one single individual's—life and salvation, and thus a figure of the story of mankind's salvation in general" (Auerbach 189). The aim of this thesis is to explore the relationship between Auerbach's reading of *Inferno* and how it relates to both Blake's unique representation of the afterlife as well as Sartre's representation of it in *No Exit*.

If life is divided into two parts by death, it then consists of two important events, namely, birth and death. These become the only two events that man cannot alter, whereas what comes in between can be controlled as subject to the person's choices in life. Birth is important as being created or brought into existence in a certain place and time, which can influence a person's fate.

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<sup>1 1</sup> "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Innocence* will be referred to as "The Chimney Sweeper" I while "The Chimney Sweeper" from *Songs of Experience* will be referred to as "The Chimney Sweeper" II.



However, no matter how difficult one's circumstances may be, a person always has the choice to alter his or her path in this life. This is a conviction of shared by Dante, Blake and Sartre. Death is also important as what allows us to face the consequences of having made choices in this life. The state of being in the afterlife is therefore intertwined with the one that preceded it. In Dante's case, God's reward or retribution is what one faces all of us upon reaching death. The same could be said of Sartre, except that he does not state his belief in a Divinity that holds the scales but rather emphasizes the responsibility of a person in life up until the moment of entering the afterlife. The choices that a person makes in this life turn into a responsibility that he later faces.

In keeping with Auerbach's approach to Realism, this thesis will demonstrate how the idea of the afterlife for all three authors can alter our perception of life in the present. These authors will be shown to represent death and the afterlife in a way that provides us with one way of looking at a character's destiny. Through various actions, choices and decisions, characters are shown to formulate their own destinies, not only in this life but also with regard to the afterlife. The inescapability of the afterlife is differently suggested in these literary works. The identity of a person and the path he or she chooses in life forms the basis for the afterlife and impacts the life of the present that is presented to the reader. Consequently, the characters presented are shown to possess qualities that the reader is invited to interpret in various ways.

## **Chapter One:**

### **Auerbach and Dante's Realism**

This chapter demonstrates how Auerbach's approach to literary realism can be applied to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, "Inferno," Cantos V, X and XXXIII. In seeking a better understanding of his own life on earth, Dante presents the afterlife with Virgil as a guide. Dante's insights into his own life provide him with one basis for interpreting the lives of others. Thus, Dante imagines his own life as including the lives of other people. He also tries to show how a certain vision of the afterlife can be continuous with life in the present.

#### **Canto V**

In Canto V, Dante the pilgrim is faced with an intriguing character, Francesca Da Rimini. This character is especially interesting largely because she is completely ambivalent about why she is being placed in hell "[T]he irony in this episode results from the discrepancy between Francesca's manner of telling her story—which has the character of a defense and whose unexpressed purpose is to elicit pity from Dante-pilgrim—and the truth we must infer from her condemnation to 'Inferno'" (Perkell 132). Francesca is placed in hell for committing adultery with her husband's brother, Paolo, who appears with her in the whirlwind, after reading the story of Lancelot and Guinevere. For Dante, sin in this instance concerns the conflict between reason and sensuality. Reading involves being motivated intellectually and coming to terms with a given subject matter. In genuine reading, the senses are ruled over by the mind. Francesca and Paolo, however, disregard intellect in favor of their sensuous pleasure through misinterpreting the texts and the moral lessons behind them. Francesca abdicates to the transcendent power of love,

viewing her narrative as in some sense the construction of an alien force. Her sins are cumulative: she fails to mentally engage in the stories she reads and thus disrupts the natural process of reading; she fails to take responsibility for her acts or acknowledge the reason for her punishment. The absence of responsibility leads to self-pity and unfounded blame.

When Francesca starts narrating her story, she rejects any role in her own fate. She first starts by blaming the “[L]ove, that can quickly seize the gentle heart” (100). In this line, on one level, Francesca begins laying the blame on the overwhelming power of love three times in three consecutive tercets, starting with the word “love”. In the first tercet, Francesca claims that love “took hold of [Paolo]” which indicates an inability to resist the power of love over him (101). Within the same tercet, she blames her “fair body” as being the catalyst in her fall (101). In the second tercet, love is described as a mighty force that “releases no beloved from loving.” Francesca not only fails to escape the power of love but also fails to see herself as anything but an object of love that is trapped in being loved (103). Within the same tercet, she implicates “his beauty” as another catalyst contributing to her disempowerment (104). Francesca unwittingly admits that her place in this circle of hell is well deserved due to her failure to understand her role in the love affair and to acknowledge Paolo’s role as a participant. But these failures keep her feelings for Paolo intact. Despite her agony in hell, she misinterprets her pain as the agony of not having been “left” by love (105). Until the end of this tercet, Francesca denies that she has the capacity to terminate her love. In the third tercet, Francesca finds love guilty of their death: “Love led the two of us unto one death” (106). Francesca’s character is not only revealed through the way that she presents herself but also in the way that she views others such as Paolo and her husband. She refers to her husband as one “who took our life” showing a total lack of

compassion for the man who discovered her infidelity (107). It appears that Francesca has only contempt for him.

Dante makes a clear distinction between his role as the protagonist/pilgrim and as his status as poet. The poet is omniscient and fully accepts the fate of the people he meets in hell, whereas the pilgrim accepts that Francesca was overpowered by love and asks her: “Francesca.../With what and in what way did love allow you/ to recognize your still uncertain longings?”, the use of the word “allow” implies the complete power of love over Francesca (116-120). Not only does Francesca believe her account of the affair, but she is able to convince another, Dante, of its power. The mutual naiveté of Paolo, Francesca and Dante the pilgrim is all of a piece. Dante the pilgrim’s compassion for the distressed couple sheds light on two important facts. First, Paolo and Francesca’s struggle to accept their state could involve a plea to Dante to help them change their place in the order of things. This plea would only be valid, however, if they were still alive. Second, Dante the pilgrim is yet to thoroughly comprehend the changelessness of their condition in the afterlife. The three protagonists of this canto not only remain unenlightened on the microcosmic level but also on a macrocosmic one.

Auerbach in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* sheds light on Dante’s unique rendering of characters: “And although they are in a situation which differs from any imaginable situation on earth . . . the impression they produce is not that they are dead—though that is what they are—but alive” (191). Francesca continues narrating her story: “There is no greater sorrow/ than thinking back upon a happy time/ in misery” the shift in time gives the impression of radical change (121-123). One undeniable truth about life is its steadiness in change, and Francesca’s melancholic reminiscence of the past is in keeping with human nature and our aspiration to enjoy better times and circumstances. She aches for a time when she was

happy and hopes for it to return, unaware that these happy times are ironically the cause of her permanent misery. The beauty of her character is in her unbending humanity and all that it encompasses. Dante presents a beautiful, layered tale in this canto: “The poet shows us literature-becoming-history-becoming-literature” (Valesio 69). The tale of Lancelot and Guinevere is the literature that takes form again in real life with the story of the forbidden love of Paolo and Francesca; in writing about the courtly lovers, Dante recreates literature. Dante simply emphasizes the simple notion that the line between history and literature is blurred and that the existence of one is never exclusive; rather, they go hand in hand. Even if Paolo and Francesca are not historical characters, they represent all of the lovers who share the same experience, and each of them represents every individual who shares their traits. Not only is the whole journey allegorical, but also the real people who Dante encounters can still inspire admiration and appeal for redemptive change.

Francesca maintains that she and Paolo literally fall unto the same trap that structures the tale they read: “One day, to pass the time away, we read/ of Lancelot—how love had overcome him” (127-128). Lancelot and Guinevere are “overcome” by love, which consequently leads the distressed lovers to the same state of disempowerment. Francesca denies herself any power and allows the text to dominate her. This shift in power sheds light on the two-way relation between a book and its reader. The fact that a text can have a certain power is undeniable. However, this power is said to function as a mysterious force: “We were alone and we suspected nothing,” she exclaims, as if the book’s power over them was incontestable and both parties had no influence in the matter (129). Other words like “reading led” (130) and “defeated us” (132) show the severity of Francesca’s conviction of the will-stripping power of the text: “A Gallehault indeed, that book and he/ who wrote it, too; that day we read no more” (137-138). The author of the text

is now evoked and the blame is now attributed to anyone and anything but Francesca herself. Francesca is a woman so absorbed in her fantasy of a love affair that in the process, she reveals her innermost deficiency to reclaim power, take responsibility and accept blame and the place in hell where she is permanently destined to reside. The portrayal of Francesca and the absence of Paolo's voice are both deeply moving. Francesca does not lack power since she is clearly more expressive than Paolo about her romantic escapade whereas men are normally seen as the dominant accomplices. Among the few voiceless men in literature, Paolo equally participates in the physical aspect of this relationship yet is unequal to Francesca in terms of persuasive power. Not only does Francesca take her life into her own hands when she chooses to betray her husband with his brother, but she also expresses a negative view of the husband she agonized. Since Francesca is already placed in hell, we might argue that she is in no place to manipulate a passing pilgrim, but she displays raw emotion to great effect. Dante the pilgrim is touched by her version of the story and the reader finds it deeply significant: "Reality is what the mind seeks when it wants truth" (Slattery 61). The reality of the matter is that Francesca remains a controversial character when one opts to judge her comportment in view of the affair.

There is humility and realism in the story of Paolo and Francesca, which differs from the stories of other well-known lovers. They are two everyday people who were Dante's contemporaries and would have been forgotten in time but if the poet had not expressed sympathy towards them. And yet, between the act of presenting real historical characters as engaged in transgression and shedding light on the magnitude of their suffering, we cannot but ponder how Dante wanted to bring the power of the text into harmony with the capacity of the intellect to serve the purpose of moral betterment. It is clear that this famous canto serves more than one purpose.

## **Canto X**

It is befitting the idea of realism that Dante the pilgrim would speak in a manner/accnt indicative of his origin. This personal aspect is embedded in Canto X, which not only specifies Dante's origin but that of another Florentine, Farinata degli Uberti. This link sheds light on yet another aspect of Dante, namely, his commitment to the Guelph party. Dante's geographical origin and ancestral heritage initially draws Farinata to converse with him, and through their conversation, Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti is coerced to interrupt them with questions of his own. Dante's narrative is the driving force behind the meeting of these two figures. Farinata's first words, "[O] Tuscan, you who pass alive," call attention to the living Florentine and how invested Farinata remains in his beloved city (22).

The visit of a Florentine, who happens to be alive, reveals how Farinata's love for Florence was not interrupted by his death but remains strong. Not only are Farinata's mental abilities intact but also his presence has profound effect on the pilgrim, who is described as "trembling" and who "drew a little closer to my guide" upon Farinata's rise (29-30). The choice of words to describe Farinata are all derivatives of rising: "who has risen" (32) and "up he rose" (35) powerfully suggest Dante's ability in presenting a character to incorporate not only speech but also body language, as Auerbach maintains: "Here—erect and abrupt as his body—Farinata's moral stature is developed, larger than life as it were, and unaffected by death and the pains of hell" (177). Auerbach explains that "the souls of Dante's other world are not dead men, they are truly living; though the concrete data of their personalities are drawn from their former existences on earth, they manifest them here with a completeness, a concentration, an actuality,

which they seldom achieved during their term on earth and assuredly never revealed to anyone else” (134).

This is clear in the way that Farinata is portrayed. He is not a dead man at all but rather an intimidating leader who inspires awe not only in Dante but also in Virgil, who warns Dante that speaking with Farinata “must be appropriate” (39). Francesca’s psychological depth is a magnificent display of realism, but Farinata’s is even more outstanding; his reality is affirmed through speech, body language and the reaction of other characters. Farinata can be fairly described in Auerbach’s words as “larger than life” (177), a character that stimulates awe despite his placement in a “sepulcher” (7). He inspires a reaction that is appropriate to those in power. The reader cannot help but wonder at the impression produced by this character, who has no regard for hell or even torment. Here Dante presents the case of a man who, instead of simply being judged for his actions, has the ability to judge for himself. Thus, Farinata is a man who invites speculation as Dante approaches him; he is described “as if in disdain” (41), enquires into Dante’s ancestry and “lifted up his brows a bit” (45) upon realizing that his guest belonged to the Guelphs. In keeping with his character, Farinata is so immersed in earthly affairs that when told of the current state of his political party, the Ghibellines, admits that the bad news is “more torment to me than this bed” (78). Farinata thus admits the extended power that his previous life still has over him, which is his inescapable fate by his own choosing. The irony of the matter is that being an epicurean, Farinata denies the immortality of the soul, and though his shadowy existence is the one that is tormented in hell, what tortures him more is the way that his past life continues to make itself felt. He illustrates Dante’s notion of the *contrapasso*, or the punishment that matches the sin.



The vividness of Farinata's character is even more strengthened by employment of the contrast between him and Cavalcante. For instance, Cavalcante is portrayed first and foremost as a father; his eagerness to talk to Dante is due only to his expectation of seeing his son with him. In contrast to Farinata, Cavalcante is portrayed as weak, which is evident from the choice of words used to describe him: "he had risen on his knees" (54), "longed" (55) and when he starts to speak, he does so "in tears" (58). Cavalcante had expected to find his son with Dante, because his memory of his son combined with an exaggerated view of his son's intellect tricks him into believing that Guido would be alongside Dante as another pilgrim: "If it is your high intellect/ that lets you journey here . . . /where is my son?" (58-60). This manner of thought is typical of a father's worry about his son and is made nobler by the fact that Cavalcante is dead. His concern for his lineage is so profound that the effect of Dante's hesitation to report news of his son's death leads him to "not show himself again" (72), unlike Farinata, "the other shade/ . . . [who] did not change aspect/ or turn aside his head or lean or bend" (73-75) upon learning that his political party has been routed. Thus, Dante employs similarity and contrast to portray each character when both of them share the pride of a father: "In Farinata and Cavalcante, then, Dante encounters fathers: literally the father and father-in-law of his closest friend, but also fathers of his city, past leaders of Florence" (Durling 137). Farinata expresses his love for his city, wholeheartedly and proudly, while Cavalcante retires to oblivion upon news of his son's death. The two characters are juxtaposed and also harmoniously aligned as fathers.

In "Farinata and Cavalcante," Auerbach sheds light on yet another aspect of the poet's work. The scenes in Dante are not just theatrical performances where characters are given their time and space to recite their lines; rather, they have the quality of life-like abruptness: "Within the brief space of about seventy lines we thus have a triple shift in the course of events; we have

four scenes crowded together, each full of power and content” (Auerbach 177). Dante and Virgil’s conversation is interrupted by Farinata’s passionate compulsion to speak. The interruption of Cavalcante and the recommencement of the conversation with the self-confident, contemplative Farinata are typical of what might occur in any crowded, earthly event.

### **Canto XXXIII**

In Canto XXXIII like, Canto V, Dante presents two people who are directly linked in their sins together; however, as Edoardo Sanguineti explains, they are added to the “infernal couples who speak in a single voice” (423). Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri’s assignment to the same circle is a continuation of their association in their previous lives. Yet, in a fairly long dramatic monologue, Ugolino recounts the story from his own point of view, like Francesca Da Rimini, while the archbishop is only a subject of mention, like Paolo, rather than a participant in the conversation. While Francesca’s strong voice is a symbol of her extended power over Paolo in their previous lives and in hell, Ugolino’s voice registers a shift in status. Archbishop Ruggieri executed his power in life over Count Ugolino, leading not only to his death but also to the death of his offspring, but now their situation is clearly reversed. The power dynamic and its shift is yet another sign that although the world of the dead is strikingly unlike the world on earth, the two worlds have much in common other than the inhabitants who spend time in both worlds. The concept of a reversal in power confirms the idea that the only permanent reality is change and, while these people in hell cannot change, they did change somewhat through their journey from life to death. Count Ugolino in hell is seen as the powerful one, while the Archbishop is literally preyed on.

Ugolino begins his story by saying: “You want me to renew/ despairing pain that presses at my heart/ even as I think back” (4-6). Ugolino here admits that he has a ‘renewable’ pain, one

that is not an aspect of his current cannibalistic state, but rather a product of the fate that befell his sons because of him. The depth of pain is strong because of its psychological connection to memory. The pain that Ugolino feels in hell pales in the presence of the pain that derives from the past. Before Dante questions him, Count Ugolino begins to narrate the story of his sons' death to his listener. If one assumes that the impression of Dante on the sinners he encounters is a clear indication of their prolonged essences—as in the case of Farinata and Cavalcante—then in Ugolino is the epitome of one who expresses his identity through a narrative. Auerbach believes that what Dante “represents is not the whole epic breadth of life, but a single moment of reality; and that single moment, moreover, encompasses a man's ultimate fate as determined by Providence” (141). Ugolino's pain is constantly renewed when he remembers the fate of his sons, an experience that defines him. Ugolino recounts the betrayal of the Archbishop, which is a known historical fact, only to shed light on an aspect of the story that is not common knowledge and “that which you cannot have heard” (19). It is as if he is arguing a case of prolonged suffering before Dante himself: “You now shall hear and know if he has wronged me” (21). This utterance indicates that Count Ugolino wants Dante to understand that the Archbishop wronged him, knowing that this would change nothing. Ugolino's plea over something unalterable is a futile lamentation, but the story of the cruel and treacherous Archbishop allows us to relate the situation among the dead to life on earth.

Ugolino lacked the ability to express his feelings to his sons, even during their last moments on earth. His monologue shows his love for his sons and the agony their fate imposes on him; however, his tragedy was that he was unable to show compassion for his children in the time they needed it most. This becomes clear when he says, “I did not weep; within, I turned into stone” (49); “I shed no tears . . . / did not answer” (52-53). His failure to speak and respond

emotionally is heightened by his display of grief: “Out of my grief, I bit at both my hands” (58). But this gesture baffled his children even more. His next reaction is not to comfort his children but only to grow “calm” (64), which also failed to express his concern. However, Ugolino suffers greatly because he knew beforehand the suffering he was about to endure from a dream that indicated the depth of his psychological suffering. He even demands sympathy from Dante the pilgrim. After verbally narrating his dream as a prediction of what was to follow, he exclaims: “If you don’t weep now, when would you weep?” (42). Consequently, not only did his children die because of their father’s sins but they also made a heart-breaking case of their feelings to their father: “Father,/it would be far less painful for us if/ you ate of us; for you clothed us in this/ sad flesh—it is for you to strip it off” (60-63).

Ugolino is faced with both the tragedy of their imprisonment and their eloquence in expressing their grief. Their eloquence intensifies the calamity of an already tragic situation to a man who is the exact opposite of his sons when it comes to emotional expression. His sons most probably did not comprehend him because the shock of the dream drained him of any emotional response. Shortly later, Count Ugolino exclaims: “Then fasting had more force than grief” (75). The ambiguity of this utterance magnifies the horror of the story. It is not clear whether hunger kills him physically or whether it simply killed his humanity, leading him to feast on his dead children’s flesh. Ambiguous as it is, this expression adds more to a grim story, for whatever explanation one chooses, his death is tragic. To endure the death of one’s offspring one after the other, then to go “blind” and finally die is the most tragic story in the whole of *Inferno* (73).

In canto XXXIII, Dante the pilgrim is seen in a new light. Throughout his allegorical journey, he has gradually moved from sympathy to understanding and even towards harshly judging the condemned. Dante tricks Fra Alberigo into revealing his identity by promising to

help him or else he “go[es] to the bottom of the ice,” which is already his destination (117). When he does reveal his identity, Dante refuses to help Fra Alberigo and acknowledges that “it was courtesy to show him rudeness” (150). This shift in Dante commands our attention. Dante’s achievement of hardened feelings towards the occupants of hell is very real, for it is common for a person who witnesses atrocities to lose empathy due to the amount of suffering he has already witnessed. Dante’s unfounded cruelty towards Fra Alberigo, however, is problematized by his statement about the courtesy of cruelty. His vanity in expressing this cruelty shows that, despite being a pilgrim who is constantly changing for the better, he also retains the human capacity to sin.

In these scenes, two realms of life are connected so that the second is the mere extension of the first, which makes both worlds equally realistic. However, another link between the living world and the hereafter is in the presence of the souls of people whose bodies are still walking the earth. Dante’s placement of Fra Alberigo and Ser Branca Doria, who are both alive in body but condemned in soul, ties the threads of the interconnectedness of both worlds. Since these peoples’ bodies are inhabited by “devil[s],” it would not be farfetched to assume that these devils interact with other living beings, thus suggesting how the afterlife can influence the living (147).

Inseparable from Dante’s style is his ability to inspire empathy among his readers. Dante’s deep understanding of the human psyche is shown at its best shown in his representation of Francesca and how through a single affair in her life, she ascends in the presence of love—and also falls because of it. One cannot say that she is a fully developed character, but in a few sentences of narration, she displays an abundance of emotional depth and a surprising degree of self-knowledge. The qualities of Francesca’s character are universal; she is a true embodiment of

courtly love and enables Dante the poet to encompass her pathos in a manner that is both profound and realistic.

## Chapter Two:

### Life and Death in Blake's Composite Art

This chapter will explore how William Blake's lyric poetry can be related broadly to the interpretation of Dante that he presents through his engravings. Blake's engravings of Dante show us how life after death can have significance for the interpretation of his poetry. Both Blake and Dante believe in the value of suffering for life. However, as he states in *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake believes that there are different stages in life and that these stages are permanent and everlasting. On another hand, being in constant flux our state of being simultaneously allows us to pass through these stages without entailing permanent residence in any one of them (Blake 80).<sup>2</sup> For Blake, suffering is not like the physical torment that Dante represented in *Inferno*; agony for him is a state of mind and is not everlasting like the punishment of the sinners in *Inferno*: “[F]or a while he (Blake) scoffed at the physical reality of a Hell such as Dante's . . . he never doubted its psychological reality within the abyss of the undermind” (Klonsky 11). The state of suffering is an undeniable reality, yet, for Blake, it is not a permanent state chosen by God to punish people; he does not believe in a vengeful deity who subjects his creations to hell with no hope of redemption. Blake believes in duality: people are simultaneously good and evil; they are concurrently creations and creators “[T]he notion of a transcendent father or creator seemed to Blake to be a profound error. From his earliest tracts through his last works he constantly repeats that God is ‘the Infinite in all things,’ that ‘All deities reside in the human breast,’ that God, as Jesus, is the same as Man” (Ferber 70).

Although Blake was regarded by many of his contemporaries as a radical on the verge of lunacy, his genuine creativity was discovered and appreciated posthumously despite the controversial

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<sup>2</sup> As cited by Milton Klonsky in the introduction to *Blake's Dante: the Complete Illustrations to the Divine Comedy* 11.

and at times problematic ideas that are present in his works of art. While a dreamer and a visionary who regarded visions and creative imagination as superior to the materialistic world he lived in, Blake criticized the wrong-doings and injustices of the world around him. The mingling of the common problems of his age with his sublime, mystical visions was presented in creative imagery. Through his critique of the corporal world, he directed his readers to another dimension of existence. Blake's understanding of religion is in direct relation to societal practices, especially unjust ones, since this relation stemmed in the first place from the exploitation of the poor and less fortunate. For Blake, religion is not just practices free from any relation to everyday problems; he saw that both, everyday practices and religion are counterparts of the same whole. His poems are a manifestation of his outrage at the injustices that pervaded British society during his time under the pretense of religion.

“The Chimney Sweeper” I in the collection of lyrics, *Songs of Innocence*, is a six-quadrain lyric poem with rhyming couplets that follow the AABB rhyme scheme. The poem assumes the form of a dialogue taking place between two chimney sweepers, one who is older and has been a laborer for some time and is therefore more experienced, and Tom Dacre, a younger recruit who has an apocalyptic dream/vision. Seemingly a didactic poem instructing children to work harder, this narrative seems to be intended for the beneficiaries of the sweeping service. However, the narrator says: “Your chimneys I sweep” as a subtle way of disgracing them (Blake 4). Despite the poem's apparent simplicity, the reader soon learns that “[T]here are layers of innuendo that reveal themselves only under careful and repeated examination, and the degree of tension between the surface meaning and the satiric implications depend much on the intellectual distance between the singer and the real author, Blake” (Erdman 108).



The first quatrain begins with a young chimney sweeper telling how he was sold into labor after his mother's death and before he could even properly pronounce his line of work; "weep!" he exclaims (3). This confusion of "sweeping" with "weeping" indicates how child laborers criticize the gross insensitivity of people who turn a blind eye on their condition. The chimney sweeper then goes to say that as a consequence, he ends up "sweep[ing]" and "sleep[ing]" in soot. Clearly, the sweeper shows us that he has matured somewhat when he correctly pronounces the word "sweep" in the fourth line. His sudden maturation – evident in better pronunciation – from line three to line four is symbolic of the harsh transformation of the infant into an older child who literally sweeps his way through the world of chimneys. The fourth line starts with the word "[S]o" as if it is common for a child's life to revolve around the sweeping industry; we learn that even at night "in soot I sleep" (4). This is direct criticism of the condition endured by this poor child who knows nothing else but this life and innocently describes his short, yet harsh, journey from the day that he lost his mother to the time of his enslavement, his rushed maturity and his labyrinth-like state of labor: "[T]he little boy explains his life as an inescapable logical progression, one thing naturally following on from the next ('When . . . And . . . So . . . ')" (Glen 36).

In the second quatrain, the narrator tells of "little Tom Dacre", who is clearly even younger than the narrator, and mentions how he soothed him when his head was about to be shaved (5). The depiction of Tom's hair "[T]hat curl'd like a lamb's back" is a biblical analogy since the lamb is a common symbol of Jesus Christ. In this analogy, the similarity between Tom and Jesus is in their innocence of any evils of the world, yet this mutual innocence is about to be denied, and thus the connection between them weakens what could be seen as a prelude to maturity and *experience*. The narrator explains how he comforted Tom with his optimistic logic

of his hair not being “spoil[ed]” anymore (8). This could be interpreted as a comparison to the suffering that Jesus went through and therefore that Christians undergo on their journey towards Heaven. Moreover, the act of shaving one’s head could also be symbolic of a loss of innocence since it is common practice among adults in a harsh line of work, such as military recruits, for instance. The contrast between the “white hair” and the darkness of soot heightens the advance of darkness; Tom’s white hair is shaved in order to spare it from being spoiled by soot, as the narrator states (8). However, Tom’s shaven head would be covered in soot as a consequence. It is as if this is a ritualistic haircut, an initiation into a new chapter in Tom’s life, one that the narrator evidently knows something about and most probably even went through himself.

The third quatrain provides a layered recount of a dream. Here the narrator reports a “sight” that Tom Dacre has while sleeping (10). The dream begins as a nightmare with an imaginary scene, a grim setting in which “thousands of sweepers” (11) are “locked up in coffins of black”, which is clearly a terrified child’s version of a chimney – dark and suffocating like a coffin (12). The children are placed in black coffins like the bags of soot on which they sleep, suggesting their unimportance, like the unwanted soot that they sweep away. There is an emphasis on the huge number of chimney sweepers who are dead in the dream. Blake employs the dream to report on the astronomical number of children who faced early death in this dangerous industry. The deploying of the names, “Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack”, is a blatant reminder that all these chimney sweepers are people, like the readers of the poem, with common names that make them seem even more real and this, as a result, makes their misery easier for the readers of the poem to understand (11).

The vision continues in the fourth quatrain. However, there is contrast between the first mention of the vision and what is presented here; they act as complementary parts of the same

whole, where both darkness and light are juxtaposed. Despite the darkness in the coffins, there comes an “angel” with a “bright key” that opens the confining coffins and sets the sweepers free (13). The sweepers finally get a chance to act like children: “leaping, laughing they run” and get to experience their overdue childhood in this vision (15). The usage of the images “wash in the river and shine in the sun” forms yet another image of a ritualistic cleansing; it marks another initiation of another chapter in the lives of these children. Not chimney sweepers anymore, the children live happily in what appears to be the Heaven they have been anticipating (16). In a way, Tom is able to defy the status quo through his imagination and creative ability, a manifestation of Blake’s belief that “the torments of hell, removed by Dante to an afterlife, were perceived by Blake to exist to a greater or lesser degree in this very life”, and in being part of this life, provided the possibility of escaping them (Klonsky 11). On another level of interpretation, the angel is intended by Blake to mock a more hopeful life, since this angel is impotent to change the actual lives of these oppressed children. And yet, due to the power of belief, the vision becomes more real and livable than the actual life that the children lead, who would rather abandon this life than accept their lives in the here and now.

These children, Tom Dacre and the narrator included, have absorbed the belief – nurtured by the Church and society – that a silent acceptance of suffering in this life is the way to Heaven. By implication, they actually manifest these thoughts in dreams to help them survive until their much anticipated deaths. The chimney sweepers in their innocence lack the ability to comprehend this immense wrong-doing; their souls are unable to understand the mischievousness of the world. They understand that they are suffering, and yet, they are shielded by innocence from grasping the nature of their distress. This is a clear and evident example of how Blake “saw religious error as so profoundly ingrained in the human psyche that

disestablishment of one corrupt form of it would not begin to effect the radical change that was needed. True reformation would require a mental apocalypse” since psychological indoctrination had already taken place in the minds of the people, including the young (Ryan 153).

The dream continues in the fifth quatrain where the children are all “naked & white, all their bags left behind” (17). This image is clearly a return to the original state of mankind since the first people were both literally and metaphorically “naked” and free of any sins or earthly worries. In such a situation, the human soul was “white” since it was uncorrupted and the body untouched by the dirt of this world. In addition, the sweepers leave “their bags behind” as a symbol of their freedom from labor, hard work and from any earthly troubles they might have carried along with them (17). The words “rise”, “clouds” and “wind” all indicate freedom and the act of rising above all the manacles that once held these children (18). The image “rise upon the clouds” implies ascension towards Heaven and the Divine (18). Moreover, in the lines 19 and 20, the angel reassures Tom that as long as he stayed “a good boy” (19), obeying the rules given to him, God will be by his side and therefore he will never “want joy” (20). These two lines are ironic and sustain Tom’s subservient state of mind. Blake clearly wants to “express a consciousness of the errors and ironies of a society in which every man’s face is a mask” (Erdman 107). The actual identity of this angel could be the clergy who promote such ideas; since surely for Blake, no God would accept the face of injustice and oppression.

The final quatrain in this poem is a return to the original situation of the chimney sweepers. In a contrasting world, Tom and the narrator wake up again into “dark[ness]” to face another day of sweeping in coffin-like chimneys (21). They carry on with their “bags” of responsibility and tiresome fate. However, the sweepers are “happy & warm” in contrast to the “cold” morning since they had their share of Heaven in the dream and the angel offered them the

promise of a joyful return (23). The final line, being the most ironic in the poem, promises the sweepers “they need not fear harm” if only they “do their duty” (24). This line is satirical on many levels. Who is to assign duties to these children? Blake does not contend that a just God would do so; but only the corrupt clergy who promoted these ideas in the first place and the parents who sold their children for monetary gain would be likely to accept such an arrangement. Moreover, after the poem has sketched the astounding misery of the children in the minds of the readers, it becomes even more highly ironic that there is a “promise” that these children need not fear harm, when the state of their everyday existence is already damaged.

There is a connection between the two lives discussed in “The Chimney Sweeper” I that allows the sweepers to retain a Panglossian view of their situation. However, in reality, their lives are inverted: in the everyday world, they are like the spiritually dead, leading lives of ongoing suffering; while in their sleep, they actually experience Heaven, which is what they should enjoy in childhood. The state in which they find themselves in their dreams soon ends when they wake up to face the death-like lives that they endure as sweepers. With this inversion of life and death, Blake makes reality itself problematic. The common wisdom is that, at the earliest stage of human life, children should be able to enjoy leisure and contemplate the world around them, while with age, responsibility and its burdens slowly creep up on life. However, in this instance, the sweepers face the complexity of combining innocence with responsibility and, in this harsh scenario, the dreams they have of Heaven inspire the false hope with which they are able to endure their current fate. This is ironic because the spiritual order of things is overturned. This upset in the spiritual order of things is Blake’s poetic social protest.

In this poem, the narrator assumes the role of the mother/guardian who comforts Tom Dacre, thus highlighting a relationship between innocence and knowledge. The kind of

knowledge implied is the inherent understanding of basic human needs that comes naturally to a person, apart from age; this cannot be taught but simply clings to every human being and is what makes him human. Unfortunately, this state of intrinsic awareness is linked to innocence, and thus, in time, it gradually fades away and is replaced by experience, another kind of subjective knowledge where kindness is largely forgotten. But the children are still young in the dream, making their hope of Heaven a hastened one, implying the anticipation of an early death. The notion of vision in this poem is an oxymoron, since Blake is a visionary himself and thus vouches for the truthfulness of vision. In this instance, Blake manipulates the notion of vision to scandalize the oppressed chimney sweepers, whose unconscious seems to turn their “vision” into a sort of defense mechanism against the horrors of spending their days in a tiny, dark and tunnel-like chimney. Blake invariably believes in the importance of vision, and this vision is significant, because it constitutes a form of personal truth that no one can experience except the visionary; it derives from his own projection, but it is divinely delivered. But paradoxically, this dream is also the exact opposite: it is a satire of British society in its entirety, and especially the religious institutes, which hide injustice and corruption by promoting the acceptance of inhumane suffering in this life as the price for entrance into Heaven in the next.

“The Chimney Sweeper” II in the lyric collection, *Songs of Experience*, corresponds to “The Chimney Sweeper” I. While sharing a common theme of underscoring the exploitation of vulnerable children condemned to harsh labor, “Chimney Sweeper” II differs from its companion poem in certain aspects. This poem is shorter than its predecessor; it is three quatrains with the rhyme scheme, AABB CACA DEDE, using two rhyming couplets. The first quatrain starts with a remark followed by a conversation. The speaker begins by noticing “[A] little black thing among the snow” (1). Blake, being the artist, paints this image in “monochrome” (Norton 5) as a

prelude to the anticipated darkness of the theme and in order to further strengthen the contrast between the “black[ness]” and the “snow” (1). Blake makes use of duality in this line. Winter is generally perceived as a gloomy season, due to the lack of sun and the absence of the colors, yet the whiteness of the snow is also a metaphor for the purifying force of nature that contrasts to the life of this unfortunate being. The identity of the “little black thing” is uncovered as a depersonalized child, who is not even perceived as a human being, except through his crying (1). Despite the fact that the speaker is apparently interested in the child, he shows a lack of patience when asking him about his parents’ whereabouts: “Where are thy father and mother? Say!” – words that compel the child to speak, as if it is not really necessary to hear him cry (3).

The child’s statement that his parents have “gone up to the church to pray” is the first straightforward attack in this poem on religious institutions and those who controlled them at the time (4). Blake alludes to several wrongs in this statement. Clearly, the fact that the parents left their child unclean, outside in the cold snow and did not take him with them to pray can be read as a criticism of society. The parents are completely unconcerned for their child’s well-being, be it physical or spiritual; they do not clean him, take him to church with them or shield him from the cold of the winter. All of this neglect occurs in the full knowledge of the church. However, the child who is unfit to enter the church because he is unclean finds solace in the purity of nature, where he feels welcome, while his parents, along with the majority of the society, pay homage to a false institute. In *Blake: Prophet Against Empire*, David V. Erdman sums up the situation of the speaker in this way: “The Chimney Sweeper is saying to the London citizen: you salve your conscience by handing out a few farthings on May Day, but if you really listened to this bitter crying among the snow you and your icy church would be appalled” (255).

In the second quatrain, the chimney sweeper continues to tell his story. To his mind, the reason behind his deplorable fate is being “happy upon the heath” (5) and that he “smil’d among the winter snow”, which led his parents to consign him to the sweeping business (6). Blake clearly scrutinizes “the effects of Empire on the human” and how even children during this period were not allowed to feel content (Erdman 252). Blake’s deceptive simplicity of vocabulary does not prevent us from considering how multiple themes combine to provide different meanings. Blake is simultaneously dealing with the themes of oppression, corruption and hypocrisy. His poem presents a bleak image through the words of the sweeper: “they clothed me in clothes of death”; yet these words mark the difference between the dream of Tom Dacre and the life of the second speaker (7). While the gruesome state of the first chimney sweeper was softened in a dream, the speaker in the second poem brings to mind his proximity to death. His clothes, which are a sign of membership in society, contrast to the raw and naked innocence that is at odds with social values.

According to Erdman, the common wisdom during that time was that “‘society cannot exist without a class of poor.’ Consequently it is our duty to teach the poor that their sufferings are necessary and natural” (253). The chimney sweeper is aware of both the reasons for his fate and the people who have made it all but inevitable. This awareness comes from his experience and therefore his judgment, which is not clouded by the innocence of absolute trust in any organization, be it the society that claims that parents look out for their children or the church that promises a better tomorrow that never comes. Blake goes to condemn society further through the sweeper’s words: “And [they] taught me to sing the notes of woe” (8). The choice of the word “taught” in this case shows that the state of “woe” is not intrinsic but one that is forced



upon the speaker (8). Unintentionally, society armed the child with the experience to fully comprehend his anguish and to voice it out in a manner befitting an adult.

In the final quatrain, the chimney sweeper is able to discern that he conveys a false sense of happiness, allowing him to survive like others in the same situation, who are also equally remote from the centers of social and religious power. He indicts his parents through understatement and irony: “They think they have done me no injury” (10) because the child is still able to “dance and sing” (9). The word “think” suggests that the truth is otherwise. The sweeper has arrived to a level of maturity that allows him to persist in life, despite being miserable. This is in keeping with Blake’s belief that “[T]o be born into this world . . . was to know heaven and hell from the inside” (Klonsky 12). The duality of human experience allows him to know both heaven and hell simultaneously and to combine innocence with experience in varying degrees. Thinking that they are guilt-free, the parents “praise God and his Priest and King” (11), but their allegiance to a false institution “make[s] up a heaven of our misery” (12). While heaven is metonymic for all goodness, Blake’s use of antonyms in the same line – “heaven” and “misery” – magnifies the deplorable state of the chimney sweeper and everyone who toils for a living in the same way (12).

Some have compared Blake to Dante in sharing a similar vision of things: “In the originality, comprehensiveness, and sheer energy of his analysis of the religious dimension of human experience, William Blake’s artistic achievement is matched in Western literature only by that of Dante and Milton” (Ryan 150). Blake and Dante both share a love of place. The love of Florence is evident in all of Dante’s works. In two of the three previously discussed cantos, Dante encounters Florentines and, in Canto X, he includes a discussion of Florentine politics. Blake, in comparison, shows explicit concern for the vulnerable chimney sweepers of London,

while discussing the spiritual failings of the British in general. But while the two poets also share a commitment to religion, Dante and Blake sometimes maintain different, if not opposed, religious beliefs. Some of these differences are manifest in Blake's depiction of Dante's *Inferno*.

Blake reprimands the notion that a person can be identified in the afterlife through only one state of being, a notion that often emerges as key to Dante's *Inferno*: "the Hell thus reified by Dante, with its ever-tightening screwlike grooves of greater and greater pain, was imagined by Blake as a series of spiritual states through which Everyman must pass in the journey through life" (Klonsky 11). Being a fellow poet and equally an artist, Blake sometimes added elements in his watercolor paintings and engravings that were not present in the original text. *Blake's Dante: The Complete Illustrations of Dante's 'The Divine Comedy'*, Plate 71 is a good example of how the poet/visual artist interprets Canto XXXIII with a twist (95). Here, Blake adds two floating angels in the prison cell with Count Ugolino and his sons. Angels for Blake often have ironic meanings, as in Tom Dacre's dream in "Chimney Sweeper" I, where they open the coffins of the dead, instead of offering salvation. The angels in Blake's illustrations of Dante could be sympathetic witnesses to Count Ugolino's suffering, but in lacking the ability to disobey the orders of God, they once again acquire ironic meanings. Through his subtle criticism of Dante, the illustrations of *The Divine Comedy* belong as much to Blake as they do to Dante and suggest Blake's unique point of view.

Visual art generally differs from the written word because it allows less to the imagination and opens up more space for interpretation. While the written word of poetry cannot be restricted by time or space, painting is confined by both. Consequently, painting's mode of depiction and coloring play a vital part in monumentalizing a certain moment when actions take place. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in *Laocoon* argues that practicing artists, whether painters or

sculptors, often base visual works on literary models without limiting the power of the works that they produce, but that “[O]n the contrary, this imitation shows their wisdom in the most favorable light” (Lessing 40). By the same token, Blake’s illustrations of *Inferno* translate the wisdom of Dante, the original author, and Blake, the visionary artist who recreates it.



**Object 10 (Butlin 812.10) “The Circle of the Lustful: Francesca Da Rimini”**

Blake’s watercolor in plate 10 (above) illustrates Dante’s Canto V, where in the circle of the lustful, the pilgrim encounters Paolo and Francesca. The illustration shows the whirlwind – where the lovers are forever entrapped – moving over the surface of what appears to be a red sea. Dante is shown as having fainted on the ground, while Virgil stands beside him over a cliff. Above Virgil, there is a shining sun shining that is encircled by two embracing lovers. The

horizontal watercolor maintains a palette of restrained green, yellow and red with an overarching background sky in different shades. While tinted with the blue and yellow that can be found in the background; the whirlwind itself is mostly white, like the shining sun.

In this watercolor, Blake chose to illustrate the moment when Dante fainted after hearing the story of Francesca. It seems that this image is intended to immortalize the exact moment when Dante felt pity for the two lovers: his intense reaction implies denunciation of eternal punishment and constitutes the first hint of criticism in the engraving. Besides, the sinners in the whirlwind are detailed anatomically, which implies close attention to their physical state. In this manner, Blake makes sure that the lovers are visible as humans and not just as dead souls. This graphic representation agrees with Auerbach who, in *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, claimed that “in giving them shadow bodies, Dante has not only given them the possibilities of pleasure and pain; above all he has enabled them to stand in sensuous concreteness before him and before us, and to manifest their state by their physical presence” (88).

Blake works Dante’s mastery against him. While Dante presents images in which sinners are forced to endure the uttermost suffering, Blake’s graphic equivalents are a reminder of their humanity and the unfairness of eternal punishment. The red sea in Blake’s Dante illustration in plate 10 is an addition to the original canto, a borrowed image from Dante himself in which this circle is described as “bellow[ing] like the sea beneath a tempest” (29) and as “symbolic to him [i.e., Blake] of sensualism and materialism” (Klonsky 139). The red sea waves have sharp edges, particularly the ones under the cliff at the beginning of the whirlwind, intensifying the agony of the lustful. Not only are the lustful eternally stuck in a whirlwind, but the initiatory point is a treacherous red sea where they probably suffered doubly because the sea and the whirlwind function as opposing forces of nature. The shining sun with entangled lovers inside it is also

unique to the illustration since Dante clearly states that “every light is muted” in contrast to what can be found in Blake (28). The image of the clasping lovers is believed by Milton Klonsky to be “Paolo and Francesca envisioned in their first and last embrace” (139). However, Dante makes no mention of any lovers’ vision in his epic narrative, so one is inclined to believe that Blake has added something in the engraving in order to propagate his own feelings concerning the two lovers.

It is highly ironic that Blake would place two lovers, immersed in a state bliss, in a section of Hell where people sinned with their bodies in love. Not only are they doing exactly what led the others to this place in Hell, but they are shielded in the sun, which sends a message that contradicts their punishment. As a source of warmth and light, the sun would act as a shining beacon for the two lovers, canceling out the whole notion of their torture. Furthermore, Paolo and Francesca are depicted in an unending punctual moment when their hands are almost out of touch, physically connected but also consumed by the fear of losing one another to the whirlwind. The two lovers are forever one, as actual hands cease to exist in favor of hands becoming part of the same whole, but they never enjoy this last moment of togetherness, thus adding to their agony. It can be argued that Blake portrayed the lovers as one to assert the vengefulness of Dante’s punishing God. Yet the lovers never cease to be one, a unity which could be seen to commemorate a triumph over their state of having transgressed the order of things. The whole painting gives an elevated feeling because of its subject matter, yet between the unavoidable tube-like whirlwind, full of naked people, and the overarching rays of the high sun, Blake brings forth forces that act against each other, sometimes in contradictory ways, in terms of their relation to the original canto.



**Object 21 (Butlin 812.21) “Dante conversing with Farinata degli Uberti”**

In the Farinata degli Uberti watercolor, plate 21 (above), Dante is seen conversing with Farinata as in *Inferno*, canto X. This horizontal illustration shows the setting of a city on fire where an uninterrupted conversation takes place, while Virgil stands on the left side and Cavalcante is almost buried on the right. There is a high wall between the people and the city in the background. The use of watercolors with their transparency –especially in the foreground– lessens the drama, while in the background the fire seems darker. Despite wearing his armor and helmet, signifying strength, Farinata is shown in extreme distress; his facial expression displays agony, as in his larger than life depiction in *Inferno*. Blake presents Farinata in a paradoxical state of being in-between; he is erect in his posture, but the feeling he conveys is pain, as though his body is not affected by the fire but rather by his mind. The state of Farinata confirms both the

predominance of present earthly happenings over his character, but it also expresses the antipathy Blake felt towards the permanence of inflicted physical torture. Additionally, Cavalcante's facial features are all distorted, telling of his anguish when he is under the impression that his son is dead.

Due to its use of the landscape, this watercolor looks like a scene from a war on earth rather than a depiction of a circle in Hell. There are differently shaped buildings in the background in addition to a hill on the right. It could be argued that Blake is subtly reinforcing his belief of the temporality of punishment by presenting the scene back on earth where the condition of the characters would be different. In *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, Auerbach states that "Dante transports his listeners into a strange world so permeated by the memory of reality that it seems real while life itself becomes a fragmentary dream; and that unity of reality and remoteness is the source of his psychological power", which is precisely the feeling that Blake conveys in this plate (173). This plate gives earthly scenery an ethereal quality because of the exact moment of depiction: a whole city is shown aflame with Farinata speaking to Dante from a grave. Blake takes Dante's words and transfers them into shapes and colors that convey the same contradictory emotions that arise from the complexity of Dante's portrayal. The merging of both worlds conveys the essence of duality present in Blake's works. This illustration seems simple, yet it is actually highly complex, it is the visual representation of a point in space and time where elements from both worlds are found, placing in question Dante's notion of the permanent nature of torment in Hell. In folding both worlds together, Blake is apparently saying that Hell is a basically state of the mind and is, for this reason, only transitory:



**Object 71 (Butlin 812.68) “Ugolino and His Sons in Prison”**

Plate 71 is an incomplete plate that shows etchings of what would have been Count Ugolino and his sons in prison, corresponding to Dante’s *Inferno*, canto XXXIII. The setting for this depiction is the prison where Count Ugolino and his sons were imprisoned. The Count is sitting in the middle, looking grim and embracing two children, while on each side of the illustration another one of his children is sitting on the ground. All of the people present seem to be in despair, except for Count Ugolino, who gives the impression of having been “turned to stone”, as he himself suggests in the canto (49). He reveals no trace of emotion but stares at his audience impassively. The incompleteness of the illustration leaves little room for analysis.

However, one clear Blakean element in this etching is the two floating angels above the Count and his anguished sons. Blake apparently chose this specific scene from Dante because it



is the least grotesque in canto XXXIII. Besides, like the angels in “The Chimney Sweeper” I, these angels are powerless; they witness the horrific fate of the Count and, in doing nothing, suggest some important Blakean concepts. Not only does their presence serve a satirical purpose, but also the way they are portrayed is indicative. The body language of the angels gives the impression of distress. The angel on the left is hiding his face in his fists – a sign of shame – while the one on the right is clutching his hand to his chest as if in prayer or supplication. These angels convey the same concept of impotence. They also perceive their helplessness and, in doing so, convey shame, unlike the ones in the poem. It could be surmised that these ashamed angels stand for any person who witnesses injustice and does not do all that is in his power to stop it. Inaction in itself becomes a crime. Even Dante concurs that there was “no need to have his [Ugolino’s] sons endure such torment” (87).

A radical among poets during his own time and no doubt in ours as well, Blake never treads lightly in any of his works. A visionary adding his visions to the epic work of another visionary; Dante, Blake creates a bridge between two kinds of poetic inspiration through witty satire, free from arrogance and the righteousness of being the sole contender of how God should be imagined. One believes that the essence of Blake’s poetic and graphic works is summed up in the words of Robert Ryan: “No one has a monopoly on religious truth, which emerges only in the conflict between opposing viewpoints. Belief walks a perilous path between credulity and skepticism, which are mutually corrective. Blake’s commitment to this kind of dialectical theology where truth is looked for in the tension between opposing claims accounts for the striking disagreements among his critics as to the real character of his theological beliefs” (Ryan 165).

## Chapter Three:

### Sartre's Version of Ethical Realism

This chapter will demonstrate the applicability of Auerbach's notion of realism to Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit*. This play is widely perceived to be the literary manifestation of Sartre's existentialist ideology that is sometimes expressed in the form "existence precedes essence" (EH 4).<sup>3</sup> In a manner that recalls the Christian belief in the afterlife, Sartre implicitly contends that death is a continuation of existence on earth, but in a 'final' state. Despite the fact that Sartre's view of the afterlife is guided by his existentialist philosophy and not derived from any religious doctrine, *No Exit* can be reexamined through aspects pertaining to religion.

Among the most commonly known definitions of existentialism is Sartre's famous declaration, "existence precedes essence" (EH 4). According to this idea, the individual cannot acquire an identity before he is already in existence in the world (EH 5). On the basis of existence, the individual can choose his own being. Hazel Barnes claims that for Sartre, "consciousness is doubly dependent on being. First, it cannot exist except as there is something to be revealed (all consciousness is consciousness of something). And it is the activity of a being; that is, of a being-for-itself" (16). Sartre divides existence into the "for-itself" and the "in-itself". The prior category stands for beings with consciousness who are able to comprehend their existence, whereas the latter category pertains to inanimate objects that exist unintelligibly. Another major difference is that the "for-itself" being is not created with a pre-determined nature or for a predestined reason but rather exists and then chooses its being. In contrast, the "in-itself" comes into being to serve a pre-determined purpose. Since human beings are not predetermined, Sartre argues that man is "condemned" to freedom. Yet, this is only "condemnation" because

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<sup>3</sup> EH will be used throughout the thesis to refer to the chapter "Existentialism is a Humanism" in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*.

humans are given no choice in this regard. Since there are things that man cannot choose his race or gender, Sartre states that human are limited by facticity, that is to say, the aspects of any life that situate the person in a concrete sense. Jonathan Webber contends: “A person’s essence, for Sartre, therefore includes character traits that incline that person towards certain types of behavior but do not determine the behavior” (22). While facticity is a limiting factor, human beings are fully responsible for their actions in this life and bear responsibilities for their choices in the life to come.

For Sartre, the notion of the afterlife is correlated to moral and ethical conduct. There is no supreme omniscient divinity who governs according to a previously given doctrine. Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* declares that “for human reality, to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which can *receive or accept*. Without any help whatsoever, it is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be—down to the slightest detail. Thus freedom is not *a* being; it is *the* being of man” (568-69). Freedom is related to choice and the ability to create oneself and consequently decide one’s future. In other words, all our fundamental actions fall under the governance of *subjective* choice. Choice is the initiating concept; one chooses who and what one is to be and simultaneously recognizes this freedom as constitutive. There is no absolute good or bad, but rather, an enlightened approach to things is what makes our actions good or malicious. This insight is evident in Sartre’s portrayal of hell. Torture in Sartre’s hell is related less to the infliction of physical pain than to being confined to a fixed essence. This sheds light on the importance of consciousness to our relationship to others.

Furthermore, human beings are social by nature. After the process of indicating one’s essence, we begin to interact with others who are equally condemned to freedom. At that

particular moment, one's essence begins to congeal somewhat. A person in this situation remains under another's scrutiny and is pressured to appear however he or she is perceived. But a human being is more than this and knows himself to be more than this. Yet, as long as the person is being gazed upon he is the suffocated subject of discovery for another and therefore is deduced to whatever this person perceives him to be. This is why, for instance, Garcin in *No Exit* is so keen to make Inez denounce her perception of him as a coward because he does not wish to be one for all time.

The importance of both freedom and responsibility is heightened by an opposing concept, which Sartre calls "bad faith," meaning a person's unwillingness to alter or direct his or her life, a failure to claim responsibility for one's actions. Consciousness is sometimes tormented by the nullity of its ontological status and thus resorts to escapism in the form of denying itself the will to choose its essence and wield its destiny. However, the burden of man's power and freedom leads him to "bad faith" because in this scenario, consciousness "stands forth in the firm resolution not to demand too much, to count itself satisfied when it is barely persuaded, to force itself in decision to adhere to uncertain truths" (B&N 113).<sup>4</sup> Bad faith thus becomes the choice of following certain terrains in life with a "barely persuaded" conviction that they were forced upon him. Yet, however unwilling, the individual cannot escape choosing his/her own fate since a rejection of choosing is in itself a choice. Thus, man is "condemned to be free" and the ability to choose entails responsibilities for the consequences of one's choice (EHE 23).<sup>5</sup>

*No Exit* is a play about three characters who are placed together in a "drawing-room in Second Empire style" (3). Garcin, Estelle and Inez, come from different backgrounds and share the same reason for being there. What is problematic in *No Exit* is that the characters we meet are

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<sup>4</sup> B&N refers to Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

<sup>5</sup> EHE refers to Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*.

already dead and thus, according to Sartre, their identities are already fixed with their deaths. The characters Sartre presents typify various qualities: Garcin represents uncertainty and doubt, Inez stands for harsh reality and Estelle embodies escapism and denial.

The realism of Sartre's characters is related to how they serve as mirrors to one another and to the receptive audience. Every single character is identifiable because of his or her past and because of his or her current interactions with others. Sartre does not deny that man is social by nature; therefore, part of what makes him more real is interactions with other human beings: "The Other's look is indispensable to maintain us in being" (Azzi 454). This exploratory motive is a confirmation of man's humanity as a conscious being. When he perceives others, he confirms their existence and consequently his as well. Sartre's characters are real despite placement in hell because of the means by which they reconcile themselves with who they really are. They are not in hell only because of past mistakes, but also because of denial. For Sartre, denial is the worst offense of all because it tries to strip us of accountability. Thus, Joseph Garcin thought that he would be in hell for torture because he mistreated his wife and had affairs with other women, while his greater offense was the one he committed against himself; he was unable to admit to himself that he was a fleeing coward rather than a hero.

The notion of realism in Sartre's *No Exit* is easy to discern because the characters are socially interactive people who are in a situation that seems life-like. However, according to Sartre, a person's essence is changeable until the moment he dies. Death alone traps us in a chosen essence for eternity. The realization of an essence is the ultimate punishment or reward according to each human life. The characters in *No Exit* have identities, yet they evolve throughout the course of the play, recognizing things about themselves that are profoundly unsettling. The alteration in their self-perception is indicative of an evolution that is in keeping

with everyday life. Perceptual shifts begin at birth and do not cease until death. However, Sartre contends that the last alteration in life founds the essence of any individual. For this reason, Sartre can present his characters as complete at the end of their lives. His characters are both stuck in a certain image of what they made of themselves through their actions and the terms with which they have come to realize their self-imposed fallacies of who they are.

In *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Auerbach discusses a “realism in the beyond” that is unlike any “purely earthly realism. In the beyond man is no longer involved in any earthly action or entanglement, as he must be in an earthly representation of human events. Rather, he is involved in an eternal situation which is the sum and the result of all his actions and which at the same time tell him what were the decisive aspects of his life and his character” (197). The notion of realism is intended to cast light on Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, but it applies to *No Exit* as well. In Sartre’s play, Inez contends that “one’s whole life is complete at that moment, with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are—your life, and nothing else” (43). The congruence of these two points of view depends on the representation of dead characters. Since they are dead, fixed and unchangeable—in terms of not being able to escape death, having established their essences as a fixed concept—Sartre’s characters do not change throughout the play. Any change that takes place unfolds gradually, while characters strip one another of any masks that hide what they might have been in their past lives.

Garcin’s famous conclusion is that “[H]ell is – other people”, thus expanding the horizon of death in a symbolic direction (45). Hell among the religious is commonly assumed to involve physical torment, but in Sartre’s play, hell is a state of being where pain is extreme but does not harm the body. One believes that the novelty of the portrayal of hell and those who reside in it

was intentional for several reasons. It is clear from the setting and unfolding events that hell is not a place vastly different from earth, signaling that the continuation of essence is not violently interrupted to call for adjustments to the new life; on the contrary, the differences are rather understandable like insomnia or not being able to close one's eyes.

The only person who inherently does not seek atonement is Inez: "I don't regret a thing" (25). Since her innate awareness of herself is unapologetically clear, Inez is the hardest to fool and the hardest for others to relate to on a personal level. Additionally, Inez is the first to acknowledge that the form of torture to be inflicted on those around her will not be administered by an external party. She realizes from the beginning that their otherness is the ultimate tool of torture: "It's obvious what they're after—an economy of man-power—or devil-power, if you prefer. The same idea as in the cafeteria, where customers serve themselves" (17). Most purely evil characters are thought to be a dramatized version of reality, which is why they are not likely to seem convincing. However, Inez's partial relatability comes from certain vulnerable moments, which are uncommon. For instance, Inez seems particularly preoccupied with her previous apartment and gets irritated when it is on display and gets rented. At this point; she admits that she has left the earth completely: "So I'm done with the earth, it seems . . . . I feel so empty, desiccated—really dead at last. All of me's here, in this room" (29). Her obsession with a small "bed-sitting-room" and particularly her bed uncovers a part of her that is human and lightens her heightened cruelty (26).

Auerbach's vision of people in the afterlife in *The Divine Comedy* is applicable to Inez as well. In *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, Auerbach maintains: "Dante transports his listeners into a strange world so permeated by the memory of reality that it seems real while life itself becomes a fragmentary dream; and that unity of reality and remoteness is the source of his

psychological power” (173). This statement casts light on how Inez is portrayed; for her fixation on her apartment becomes “fragmentary” all the while her life in her current room acquires increasing reality. The emptiness she expresses when she no longer feels linked to earth highlights what Auerbach calls “reality and remoteness”; in this situation, she comprehends that her current existence is the only reality that matters, but she still lingers in her previous life’s business (Auerbach 173).

Despite the iron mask Inez puts on, she seems as much in need of recognition as are the other characters. In fact, she not only seeks recognition in the eyes of another conscious being—Estelle—but also from an object. Though she is clearly obsessed with Estelle, the irritation that she feels about the rented apartment, knowing she would not inhabit it again seems like a naïve thought that the apartment would always be hers and that no one will live in it, at least not soon enough. As long as the apartment is empty, she somehow leaves an imprint on it and can assert her past presence. In that instant, the situation is inverted; Inez seeks confirmation of her past “for-itself” being from an “in-itself” object.

Furthermore, Inez seeks to be gazed upon by Estelle for several reasons. First, Inez like any Sartrean character cannot exist alone without being observed and thus preserved as a peculiar being. She admits: “When I’m alone I flicker out” (26). Second, it is not only out of desire that she seeks to be seen, but also because in her own way, Inez assumes whatever classification is imposed on her. Marie-Denise Azzi contends: “Inez belongs to a whole group of characters who take back upon themselves the image they receive from others and who deliberately push these images to their extreme consequences” (442). In her desire to make people suffer, Inez intentionally accepts what people allow her to be and uses it against them. What supposedly should have weakened her became her ultimate weapon and life goal; thus,



“having been accused of being evil by others, she then made evil the project of her existence” (Azzi 442). But in spite of all the cruelty she exercises, it should be noted that Inez is not an actual murderer; she was in fact murdered by Florence. After stealing Florence from her husband (Inez’s cousin), the husband commits suicide on account of their betrayal. Inez’s harsh remarks and continuous reminder of Florence’s unfaithfulness to her husband and the ensuing outcome—the cousin’s suicide—ultimately leads Florence to kill herself along with Inez.

In *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, Auerbach claims that “the situation and the attitude of the souls in the other world is in every way individual and in keeping with their former acts and sufferings on earth; that their situation in the hereafter is merely a continuation, intensification, and definitive fixation of their situation on earth, and that what is most particular and personal in their character and fate is fully preserved” (88). This predicament relates to each character in *No Exit*, especially Inez. Inez by her own admission is a cruel person—“I was what some people down there called ‘a damned bitch’. Damned already”—and remains in hell, thus confirming Auerbach’s idea of how dead souls continue in the afterlife (25). Inez tortured even Florence whom she supposedly loved: “I used to remind her everyday: ‘yes, my pet, we killed him between us’”; and she continues to inflict suffering on Garcin and Estelle in hell (26).

In Garcin’s own mind, there is a struggle between two contradictory visions of himself, namely, a true self and a false self. In spite of his admission and evident conviction that he does not “regret anything” (24), Garcin is clearly torn and does not know who he is, nor can he decide, as he says, “I can’t decide” (37). The owner of a pacifist newspaper, Garcin refused to fight and opted to escape in the belief that he would be more useful as a journalist working in Mexico. But he constantly questions his motives for running away: “Were they the real reasons? . . . was that my real motive?” (37). Dubbed a coward, Garcin does not accept the label assigned

to him by his colleagues on earth, so he seeks consolation from Inez that he was judged unfairly. His need to be perceived as he wishes to be perceived transcends Estelle's inauthentic attempt to deceive him into believing that indeed he is not a coward at all. In short, he longs for the acceptance of someone else who has the mental capacity to apprehend both cowardice and heroism and to judge him in a positive light.

Garcin is in a constant state of uncertainty because of his inability to conceive with absolute certainty the reality of what things actually are. One believes he truly does not know beyond a doubt whether he was a coward or a hero, but he might be more inclined to see himself as a coward, which is why he needs Inez to tell him otherwise. However, his true dilemma is that he is never certain and is continuously in need of certainty through the help of someone else. Being gazed upon results in a contradictory situation; it concurrently gives and takes, and it is also indispensable: "Although the Other's look infringes painfully on the for-itself of the Sartrean character, he cannot do without it" (Azzi 453). The uncertainty is so painful for Garcin that he would rather have physical pain inflicted on him than be forever unsure of who he is: "anything would be better than this agony of mind" (41). Garcin's psychological "agony" highlights his realism, for what would it matter for a dead man if he was actually a coward or a hero, especially if it cannot change his current state? Even if Garcin could convince Inez that his act of running away was forced upon him, the fact is that he is remembered as coward by his friends, who continue to talk about him. His need to be remembered as a hero is understandable since he would like to have "carved out my place in history"; yet, his search for affirmation puts him under the power of Inez, who continues to make him suffer (39).

In this sense, Garcin brings about his own torture through clinging to the past rather than reconciling with the present. Auerbach describes this phenomenon in the "Farinata and

Cavalcante” section of *Mimesis* in terms of how “the waves of history do reach the shores of the world beyond . . . .” (198). Garcin, like Inez, is strongly attached to being posthumously present on earth. His thoughts constantly return to the people who still talk about him after death. At one moment, despite being in an embrace with Estelle, Garcin’s attention is easily diverted to a conversation about him on earth. While the two other characters are fighting to be remembered, this recurring attachment to the earth is a curse for Garcin: “You’re lucky, you two; no one on earth is giving you another thought. But I—I’m long in dying” (38). Garcin being shamed on earth makes him turn to the people around him in search of a fleeting affirmation that invalidates his peers’ claim: “Only you two remain to give a thought to me” (43). Inez acts for Garcin as the moral compass with which he tries to escape his self-deprecating, hellish thoughts. However, Inez’s condemnation of Garcin is utterly terrifying: “You’re a coward, Garcin, because I wish it” (44). This possibility plus his realization that he is still tied to the earth by his peers’ view of his cowardice marks his epiphany that hell is other people.

Of all three characters, Estelle is the epitome of Sartre’s bad faith. Estelle is the last character to admit that her placement in hell is not a “ghastly mistake” as she initially proposed (15). She was cornered into admitting that there is a particular reason for her being in the same room with Garcin and Inez. Despite the fact that Estelle is outwardly perceived as the most innocent among all three, she is in fact the only actual murderer in addition to having brought about the death of someone else; she committed infanticide when she ended her own baby’s life, which ultimately led Roger to commit suicide. Unlike Inez, the most horrifying truth about Estelle is that she committed murder in cold blood and was still able to carry on living without remorse. If she had not died of pneumonia, she would have led a life free of guilt. This is most evident when she passively recounts to Garcin and Inez that train of events that led her to murder

her baby. While narrating, her face remains emotionless and her narration is devoid of feeling. To Estelle, having a baby daughter was “worse luck” (28).

Estelle is evidently in a state of constant denial. The first layer of her denial is that her being in hell is a mistake. The second is that she untruthfully claims that she wasted her youth: “No doubt, by certain standards, I did wrong to sacrifice my youth to a man nearly three times my age. Do you think that could be called a sin?” (16). The third layer is that she denies taking an active role in choosing to be with Roger and instead perceives him as a man she was “fated to love” (16). This emphasis on ‘being fated’ implies helplessness, which strongly reflects her bad faith: “Isn’t it better to think we’ve got here by mistake” (15). At the same time, it also shows that Sartre’s Estelle is most reminiscent of Dante’s Francesca. Both characters share a lot more than merely being young women in a love relationship; they not only encompass layers of denial, they distance themselves from all self-inflicted blame. The chief difference between both characters, however, is that Francesca lays all blame on youth and beauty while Estelle uses them to her advantage.

As Sartre states in *Being and Nothingness*, “bad faith is not restricted to denying the qualities which I possess, to not seeing the being which I am. It attempts also to constitute myself as being what I am not” (111). Estelle puts on a façade of being innocent, thus attributing to herself traits that she does not possess; in essence, she fulfills Sartre’s vision of bad faith. In “Farinata and Cavalcante”, Auerbach argues that the dead own “within their changelessness, a limited freedom of change. We have left the earthly sphere behind; we are in an eternal place, and yet we encounter concrete appearance and concrete occurrence there. This differs from what appears and occurs on earth, yet is evidently connected with it in a necessary and strictly determined relation” (191). Estelle is the embodiment of being changeless with a limited

freedom of change as she is the same character throughout the play, yet she evolves in the sense that her self-image changes, though her identity remains fixed.

Moreover, being a group in the same room, all three characters assume the semblance of a society, one that is reminiscent of their previous lives. Consequently, the microcosm that Sartre constructs acts as a reflection of everyday life and gratifies the statement that “[R]ealist theory of art does not necessarily claim that art mirrors the world, but rather that artists construct a symbolic reflection of their environment” (Truitt 141). Naturally, being surrounded by others, one interacts with others, and within these interactions, each individual spontaneously exercises his power of objectifying the other, which contributes to the ongoing dynamic of the play.

At the same time, like Dante, Sartre, presents us with characters—Garcin, Inez and Estelle together—who suggest the existence of a divine power. The individuality of each character becomes the hell of the other; their lack of reconciliation seems to follow a certain plan. In spite of the lack of religious governance in Sartre’s play, an omniscient being seems to have placed people in the habitation that suits his or her preceding life. Also like Dante’s *contrapasso*, Sartre seems to accept some version of just punishment. The differences that enable Sartre’s characters to sustain their individuality are equivalent to their personalized Hell. While in the same room and subjected to the same treatment—or punishment—the effect varies for each of them, creating differences, even if, from the outside, punishment appears to be the same. The insights that we can derive from examining each character corroborate Auerbach’s approach to realism.

## Conclusion

Christianity believes in the possibility of freeing the human being from the limitations of sin in order to provide a new meaning to individual existence. While the three authors examined in this thesis, namely, Dante, Blake and Sartre, support this notion in different ways, each has a unique perspective on the shifting phases through which human beings are able to define themselves in terms of what is possible. They all share a concern for the essence of the human soul and accordingly explore it in their writings. Erich Auerbach's path-breaking study, *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, identified features in *The Divine Comedy* that established realism as a literary style for providing images of the afterlife. His analyses established the resemblance between the dead people in the epic and the living people who read it. This semblance was not always present in everyday life but rather more profound, drawing upon the characters' clear-mindedness and psychological depth, or lack thereof in the case of Francesca. Thus, Auerbach proposes that "modern mimesis found man in his individual destiny; it raised him out of the two-dimensional unreality of a remote dreamland or philosophical abstraction, and moved him into the historical area in which he really lives" (178). This is what Dante, Blake and Sartre accomplish. Sartre is the only person who rendered Hell according to the philosophy of Existentialism, but his extensive analysis of essence and its continuity in the afterlife indicates values that he shares with deeply religious writers like Dante and Blake. The relationship between Dante's and Blake's beliefs is unorthodox; both strong-minded Christians agree on key concepts such as suffering and unity with the Divine, but they offer opposing images of these concepts.

Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* in order to project the Will of God as he understood it, and what makes this performance more subjective is that it refers to his own contemporary, still

living companions, who he places in hell. Through his creative imagination, guided by his profound beliefs, he sought to attune religion through the medium of poetry to represent, as Auerbach puts it in *Dante Poet of the Secular World*, “man, not as a remote legendary hero, nor as an abstract or anecdotal representative of an ethical type, but man as we know him in his living historical reality, the concrete individual in his unity and wholeness” (Auerbach 175) and in doing so, Dante’s epic is constructed to offer its readers “an ultimately eschatological truth, as historically incarnate” (Franke 106).

Inspired by Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Blake saw that “to repair the damage done by the fall of humanity, then, would entail transforming religion back into poetry” (Ryan 155). Blake, like Dante, was deeply religious and as deeply concerned about contemporary society. However, it would be a mistake to confine a visionary, such as Blake, to a certain set of beliefs. With his paradoxical take on religion and society, “[h]e saw that all religion posed a formidable danger to human welfare. And yet he believed that one must cultivate certain forms of it in order to keep others from triumphing” (Ryan 166). His belief in God was combined with a belief in man as well. The Divine, for Blake, is one with man; the creator extends himself in his creations and, in doing so, everyman is part of the Divine. Consequently, the concept of eternal physical and emotional punishment is not acceptable to Blake. His mastery of conveying complex ideas through the medium of simply worded poetry allows literature to describe man’s relationship to God and relationships between persons in society. In this poetry, Blake takes away power from the Church and hands it to the people. Through scandalizing the wrong-doings of society in his poetry, he tries to help people see the exploitation of religion for what it really is. By dramatizing the pain of knowing how much they have strayed from their true essence—of a potential oneness

with the Divine as experienced within—people could begin purifying the world of the misfortunes they caused, not only to others but also to themselves.

Both, Dante and Blake shared a feeling of alienation from the secular world that they variously sought to depict in works of literature. Dante was literally banished from his beloved Florence, while Blake was regarded as delusional when he strayed from the orthodox set of beliefs that informed the Christianity of his day. Their estrangement is clearly expressed in their work as much as their religiosity. Blake defames child labor under the patronage of the Church in “The Chimney Sweeper” I and II, while Dante discusses Florence enthusiastically with Farinata in Canto X. Moreover, Dante and Blake believed that suffering is an integral part of being; while Dante believed that eternal punishment directly corresponds to the sin itself—contrapasso, Blake found that “the ingenious system of tortures contrived by Dante to punish sinners in Hell morally abhorrent and repugnant to his most deeply felt religious beliefs” (Klonsky 8). For Blake, all that is Holy or Divine is gracious and innocent; it should not be subjected to the malice of retribution, whether in this life in the form of revenge or in the next life in the form of eternal punishment. For Blake, suffering is impermanent and can be challenged through the imagination, which is evident when the chimney sweepers envision worlds where their suffering is less real.

Lacking faith in religion, Sartre put his complete faith in human existence. He believed that humans were burdened with the responsibility of choosing their essence as a long-range affair. His conception of how being is personalized is discussed in *Being and Nothingness*: “I choose myself perpetually and can never be merely by virtue of having-been-chosen; otherwise I should fall into the pure and simple existence of the in-itself” (Sartre 617). Furthermore, Sartre, as well as Dante and Blake, believed that accountability comes from the complete freedom to



act; whatever a person chooses to do creates a ripple effect in his existence, following him not only in this life but also in whatever of his being survives him. This belief in posthumous existence, or formed essence, is largely in harmony with the beliefs of Dante and Blake. Dante subscribes to a strict belief in heaven, hell and purgatory; whereas Blake believes that temporal suffering can purge a person of his sins. However, Sartre's view of Hell agrees more with Dante's: when it comes to suffering—in general, as both portray suffering differently—they both hold that a person's fate acquires permanence with death. Interestingly, the Supreme Being who seems to run Hell in *No Exit* resembles the God of Christianity who exercises supreme power over his creations.

Despite their differences, Dante, Blake and Sartre commonly project realistic characters into the realm of the dead in a manner that engages the reader to reflect on his own spiritual reality. The interpretation of these works requires that the reader go beyond the perceptual setting that is invariably evoked. Dante's *Inferno* is a reflection of the poet's own life and depicts many of his contemporaries. Blake's lyric poems, which can be related to his designs of Dante, employ the metaphor of death to show us how human life can be distorted when religious values are misunderstood. Sartre's vision of Hell provides an image of how people suffer from the inescapable gaze of the other—in the next world, which bears a resemblance to the world of the living. Whether derived from religious belief or philosophical reflection, the interrelation of the state of existence, fate and human responsibility always contains a subjective dimension and provides considerable room for literary exploration.

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