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## Satan and The Inferno: Dante's contribution to the Legacy of Hell

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# SATAN AND THE INFERNO: DANTE'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE LEGACY OF HELL

BY CHRIS SCHAFER



Figure 1: Engraving of Satan by Gustave Doré, 1890

PUT FORTH IN THE FORM OF A SCRIPT, THIS ANALYSIS OF CANTO 34 FROM DANTE'S INFERNO DIVES INTO THE CHARACTER OF SATAN AND HIS REPRESENTATION IN DANTE'S INFERNO. HELL WITHIN DANTE'S JOURNEY IS ALSO DISCUSSED, LOOKING AT HOW AND WHY SATAN FELL THROUGH THE EARTH AND CREATED THIS HORRIBLE PLACE THAT HAS GONE BY SO MANY NAMES. THE UNDERWORLD, THE INFERNO, OR HELL, ARE ALL ADEQUATE NAMES TO DESCRIBE THIS AMAZINGLY HORRID PLACE THAT HAS A SURPRISINGLY DULL ENDING ENCOUNTER WITH SATAN HIMSELF.

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SATAN!! What a powerful figure in both pop culture and within the catholic religion. Even within other religions, he exists, just as other names. Within Islam, he is named Shaytan, which funnily enough sounds very similar. In Judaism, the word "satan", refers to something difficult to get past or a temptation to overcome. Even in Buddhism, this mighty evil goes by the name Maara. Thus, being such a popular figure, it would stand to reason that an epic poem starring an enlightened man facing the sinners of hell would have his final confrontation against an amazingly evil figure in the finale. Dante's Inferno, the first of a 3 part epic poem, focuses on Dante the pilgrim, and his journey through the 9 circles of hell with his guide Virgil. He meets many different figures along the way, all educating him on the different sins they committed and the reason for their punishment.

Finally, we as readers, along with Dante, get to the center and meet the all-powerful Satan in the last chapter, or canto of the first part of the story: Inferno. The image Dante paints looks like this. Not exactly what you pictured? Me neither. Sitting there in ice, slowly munching on sinners, he is not some huge face of evil that we would have expected. Dante shows the audience here that evil may not always be a fiery hell. Satan is quiet, slowly gnawing on Brutus, Cassius, and Judas. Again, it is a slow gnaw, and the reader is given a clear picture of how this obese represents

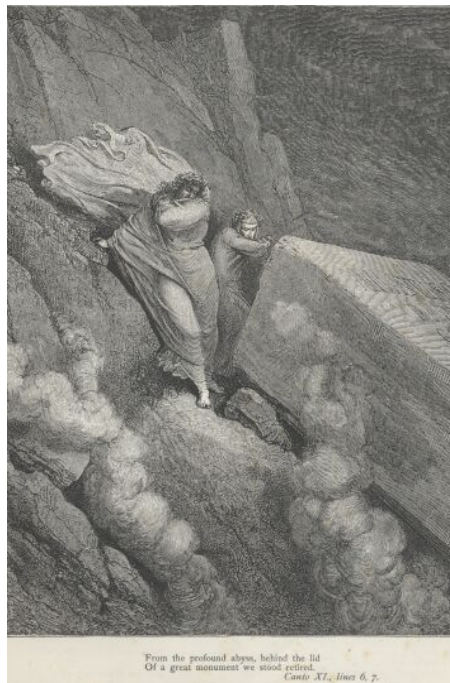
everything horrid. Not only this, but we finally also see the worst of the worst; those who have sinned have been fraudulent against God himself. While the 9th and the worst circle is saved for those who have betrayed others in general, these three have betrayed God, with Judas betraying Jesus. Brutus and Cassius betrayed Julius Caesar, who in line with Dante's sentiment, ruled the greatest empire ever based in the greatest city ever, Rome.

After we see this horrid site, our two main characters finally conclude their journey through the inferno by going up or down, depending on how you see it. Sound confusing? It was for me too at first. The two walk up a staircase and come to a place in which gravity is inverse of how it was in hell. Dante even comments on how when they walk up, Satan's legs can be seen in the ice, only inverted. Virgil then explains why this is, as well as how hell was formed. Satan, before he was stuck in ice, was the all might lucifer up in heaven. At some point he fell, falling through the earth as dirt scrambled to move away from him, creating the nine circles of hell.

Dante repeatedly talks about how humans misuse their human spirit for more primal action. The worse these sins are the farther down they are. Just like how Satan fell from the heavens, Dante shows us that humans have fallen from grace in his eyes. The fall of Rome left us with cities such as Florence that house corrupt politicians as well as clergymen. Satan being stuck in the ice, bloated and sad, is a symbol of what Dante thinks of humanity. They are creatures that have succumbed to their primal instinct and become like animals themselves. Canto 34 and fat old Satan with his three heads embody all of Dante the pilgrim's journey through hell. He wants us the readers not to be like this fat gross figure, but find the way through our own hell, as he did. Thank you.

## A METHOD TO THE MADNESS: DANTE'S INTERPRETATION OF HELL

In Canto eleven, the pilgrim and Virgil find themselves on the edge of the 7th circle of hell, looking down into the depths of hell and smelling the extremely putrid scent from the hole. They also notice a statue with the inscription reading, as translated by Robin Kirkpatrick “I guard Pope Anastasius, drawn by photons from the rightful road”. Dante the poet makes sure to include this detail in a canto otherwise devoted to exposition in order to show the audience that everyone in God's eyes, including the Pope, is capable of sin. While brief, it serves as an important message before the audience begins to learn about those who dwell in the lower three circles of hell.

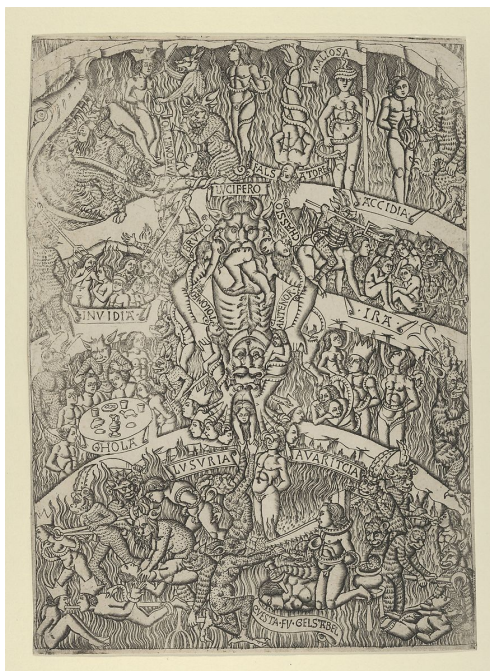


*Figure 2: Engraving of Virgil and Dante in front of Pope Anastasius' tomb by Gustave Doré, 1890*

At the edge of the abyss, the two travelers are so disgusted by the scent that Virgil recommends that they stop and let their senses adjust before continuing on deeper. Dante the



pilgrim then asks to occupy this time with something productive, and Virgil obliges. The next part of the journey through hell is explained using the three remaining circles of hell. The seventh circle is for those who were violent against others or themselves, while eight and nine are reserved for those who were deceitful or fraudulent. The lower one gets in hell, the worse the crime is according to God. While the audience has received some explanation as to the structure of Dante's journey, this is the first major scene in which we learn the physical structure of hell. Before this, the only explanation the audience had was in Canto eight and nine, learning that hell was split up into an upper and lower half. The clear designated difference that separates the crimes in the lower half from the upper half is the clear malicious intent of the crimes rather than the misuse of God's love.



*Figure 3: Engraving of the Inferno according to Dante by an unknown artist in the 15th century*

The ranking of different sins done by Dante very clearly in this Canto sheds light on how he sees himself as enlightened. The way that Dante the Poet describes God's opinions as if he has

spoken to God shows that his opinion of how hell should be structured should be the only way. A method to his structure is clear though, the sins of the lower three circles all relate to god's creation misusing their human spirit. For example, violence is one reverting back to their animalistic instincts instead of relying on their god-given intelligence. Dante the Poet explains that the sins of one giving in to their primal instincts are the worst except for those who are fraudulent. Fraud is a sin that God hates the most because it is uniquely human. For someone to commit fraud, they must first know the right thing to do and decide against it. Thus, the sinners who decided to turn away the truth of God and family are in the lowest circle being knawed on by Satan.



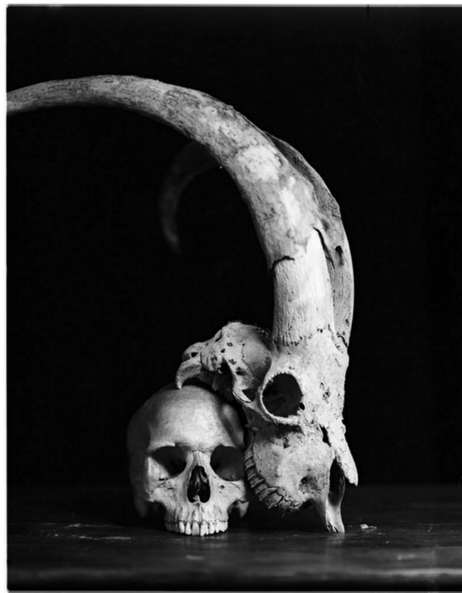
Figure 4: *La Divina Commedia di Dante* by Domenico di Michelino painted in 1465

As Virgil finishes his explanation, he reflects on the sin of usury, or the use of money to make more money. A common example would be the charging of interest on borrowed money.

Virgil explains that the sin of usury derives its wrongful nature from the principles of what he calls nature and physics. In essence, he explains that from these ideas as well as from the first lines of Genesis, charging interest on money is the rejection of God's gift of independence. One should be creative and learn to stand on their own feet instead of using others. The Canto then ends there, leaving the audience with a foul sentiment about the severity of fraudulent behavior.

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## SATAN



*Figure 5: Stock image of a skull*

**NICKNAME:** King of all that is Evil

**QUOTES:** While Satan does not speak in Dante's interpretation of the character, his presence is enough to incite extreme fear into Dante the pilgrim. In the Robin Kirkpatrick



translation of the comedy, Dante describes in Canto thirty-four that he felt, “ how faded, dry- reader, don’t ask, I shall not write it down...” when encountering Satan

**PRINCIPLE CHARACTERISTICS:** In the comedy, Satan is portrayed as a large hulking figure stuck in a lake. In its three heads are three sinners: Cassius, Brutus, and Judas. He does not speak or make any other movements besides chewing slowly on the three men.

**HISTORY:** Within different cultures, Satan has gone by different names. Within Greek and Roman mythology, he was known as the god of the underworld. In the Christian religion, he has had many names. The Devil, Satan, Lucifer, the Serpent, or the Prince of Darkness are only a few. In Jewish culture, he was first depicted, according to *A Brief History of the Devil* by Izak Spangenburg, as a member of the godly court opposite Yahweh. The noun “satan” is roughly a translation of opponent or adversary

**DANTE’S REPRESENTATION:** In Dante’s representation, Satan is shown as a static figure, not moving or doing anything interesting. Compared to many other representations throughout history in which Satan is a towering fiery figure, this seems almost dull. While there are no detailed descriptions of the devil written in the Bible, throughout history, especially starting in the middle ages, he is associated with fire and demons. This would be the opposite of how Dante portrays him, with Satan being stuck in ice and being obese.

## MODERN CONSUMERISM AND DANTE'S CYCLE OF HISTORY

In today's world, capitalism dominates our economy, especially in America. Due to companies like Amazon or Walmart, almost anything is available with the click of a button. Twenty years ago, this was not a reality. With the rise of the Internet, goods and services became much more easily accessible. However, especially with a raging pandemic, the wealth gap between the rich and poor due to these services has grown exponentially. Dante in his epic poem explains his views on how the lives of those who are rich are much worse in God's eyes than those of the poor. Topics such as Gluttony, Greed, and Usury are key sins in Dante's inferno of Hell. If these are sinful ideas even in the renaissance, one could only imagine how Dante would react seeing the scope of sin today.

The sin of gluttony occupies the third ring of Hell. Dante the poet describes this sin as one of eating excessively and taking food others might be able to have. He talks with a sinner who, wants pity from Dante and to feel justified in their actions. This is a trend throughout Inferno seen with sinners from different circles as well and those who have been greedy or committed usury must feel the same way. The horrifyingly large mounds of bile could remind a modern reader of the obesity epidemic that America suffers from today. As of 2018, 42.4 percent of Americans would be considered obese and the annual cost of obesity would be 148 billion dollars according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Dante explains through imagery not just in this Canto but others as well how humans are special because of their ability to have higher intellect and ignore it. Those who sit in the bile knowingly took extra food for themselves instead of learning that one does not need all of this. Modern services like DoorDash

or giant food courts that encourage overeating through excessive spending are only a few examples of how Dante's message of living a medium lifestyle is overlooked today.



*Figure 6: Engraving of the gluttonous by Gustave Doré, 1890*

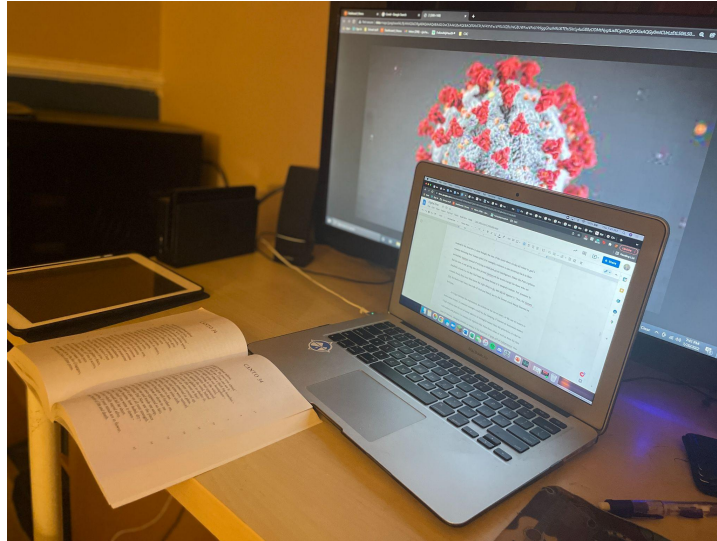
This medium, or humble lifestyle that Dante wanted us to live, evidently would be without greed. Since the 1950's according to an article by PBS.org, buying bigger and better items as led to a higher social status and supposedly a better life. As an audience, we look at the sins that Dante points out and can confidently say that Jesus lived a life without those sins. He would help the poor, and not overspend or overeat. Dante, using Jesus' teachings, would say that one needs to beware of having unneeded possessions(Luke 12:15). Greed in today's society is prevalent with the richest growing richer every day off the backs of others. Amazon, for

example, grows bigger through the hard work of thousands of employees all over the country. However, people like Jeff Bazos gain immensely from this. Dante shows the audience through his works that even in renaissance times, people like this ruined Florence with their money-harboring ways. His cynical nature when looking at sinners also sheds light on his view of humans changing. At the very end of Purgatorio, the story almost feels as if it is circular. The character Dante would end up back in that dark wood and begin his adventure all over again. Dante's repetition represents history itself repeating as people will always be Greedy, Lustful, Gluttonous, or Violent

Usury is yet another way that the rich extort the poor. Instead of giving money to the poor, as Christian doctrine commands that one do, it is instead a loan of money, not a gift. Today this takes the form of student loans, credit card debt, and mortgages. In a capitalist society, usury allows the rich to stay this way. Virgil's explanation of this in Canto 11 uses a social argument, looking at how the money made from other money is not valid. It is not creative and people should have to work to make their own money.

The cycle of wealth has flourished within the capitalist society that we live in today. Dante's prediction through his work has come true as a pessimistic view of people's character stands true today. The issue of modern consumerism correlates directly with the corruption and money issues of Florence from Dante's time. According to Dante, history will always repeat itself and we as humans will never change. In an ideal world, if people can come together and realize what is necessary to break the cycle and live a humble life, Dante will be proven wrong and the world would be a better place for it.

## #FEELINGLIKE DANTE RIGHT NOW



*Figure 7: Photo was taken in 2022 by Christopher Schafer*

Dante in the first part of his comedy, goes through nine circles of hell, all having to deal with different sins. Over thirty-four cantos he experiences all sorts of hell and fights through extreme adversity. At this point, I have recovered from COVID-19. However, for the first week of this class, I was in isolation with only my thoughts and school. When reading Dante, especially within the gluttony circle, I felt similar to Dante seeing the piles of bile. My room felt dirty and disgusting as I could not leave. My dirty clothes started to pile up as I could not leave or do laundry. Reading the comedy I felt like I was in Dante's shoes, dredging through hell facing one misfortune after another.



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