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## WHAT OUR HEARTS CRAVE FOR: AN EXAMINATION OF THE PARADOXICAL ATTRACTION TO DANTE'S INFERNO

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WHAT OUR HEARTS CRAVE FOR: AN EXAMINATION OF THE PARADOXICAL

ATTRACTION TO DANTE'S INFERNO

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Abstract

This paper serves to analyze and explain why audiences are attracted to stories with elements of Horror in them, using Dante's *Inferno* as the vehicle for this conversation, as the *Inferno*'s setting is in the worse possible place imaginable. Horror narratives arise feelings of fear and disgust in its audiences through the use of monsters, as audiences relate to the fear and disgust the positive characters in the narratives are feeling because of the monster's presence. Since these emotions arise in a safe space, such as in literature or film, where the source of the emotions is not endangering the audiences, the audience is able to safely purge or purify these emotions within them, in a process known as Catharsis. Thus, it is this desire to have these heightened emotions without any of the risks that causes audience members to seek out Horror narratives.

## What our Hearts Crave for

### An Examination of the Paradoxical Attraction to Dante's *Inferno*

Dante's *Divine Comedy*'s important starting point of Hell is undoubtedly frightening, and troubling. The controversies about the work have been about its horrific depictions of the punished, such as how "blasphemers were hung by their tongues, adulterous women were suspended by their hair over bubbling mire, murderers were cast into snake pits, abortionists were sunk in filth, persecutors of the righteous were scourged by evil spirits, and so on" (Thomas G. Bergin, 8). Yet, the *Divine Comedy* holds an influential place within the literary canon. This paper is not aimed to refute its place, status, or merit, nor is it a critique of its influence in the world, but instead an analysis of the features that captivate us. The aforementioned qualities of the book should horrify us, scare us away from such a story because of all the terrible things that the characters are going through, because we wouldn't want that to happen to us. It is undeniable that the contents of the book are horrific, yet we read it. We enjoy it. We indulge in it. It is a story about Hell, a realm that has cemented its place in the modern western world as the worst of worse places, using it as a scale to evaluate other misfortunate circumstances—like war is Hell, addiction is Hell, this hurts like Hell, and so on and so forth—and here we are presented with a story of it, and we enjoy it. It seems to be wrong that we enjoy and take pleasure in depictions of pain, suffering, and horror because of what that says about our moral character. In real life, it is morally bad to take pleasure in those kinds of things and a sign of a morally bad character<sup>1</sup>. Yet,

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<sup>1</sup> For example, one might recognize that enjoying the emotions we get from doing bad acts, such as maliciously scaring and harming others, is a sign that something is wrong with our moral character.

this kind of thinking is not the case when we participate with fiction, such as Dante's *Inferno*, and this distinction needs an explanation, which is my goal. When we participate in a work of horror, whether that be a literary work, film, poem, etc., we as the audience mirror the emotions, the fear and disgust, in the story and safely release these emotions by the end of the work in a process known as Catharsis.

### 1. What makes Dante's work a *Comedy*?

But before we begin, it would be unwise to talk about only Dante's *Inferno* without describing its context and role and the *Divine Comedy*, so this explanation is in order. The first place to start is understanding how Dante defines a comedy. In his "Epistles to Can Grande", Dante responds to letters to Italian nobility Can Grande Della Scala who was puzzled as to why Dante called his work a *comedy*, and Dante replies by saying that a comedy is the contrast of a tragedy. A tragedy's "beginning is admirable and quiet, in the end or final exit it is smelly and horrible" ("Epistles to Can Grande" 9). The narrative starts at a high point, such as in a place of power or prosperity, and ends in a much worse place, such as great ruin or death. A comedy is simply switching the order of the two different states of affairs, beginning "with harshness in something, whereas its matter ends in a good way, as can be seen by Terence in his comedies. And thus, letter writers are accustomed to say in their salutations in the place of an address `a tragic beginning, a comical end'" ("Epistles to Can Grande" 10). Thus, it is fitting to call the *Divine Comedy* a comedy because of the stark changes from the beginning to the end, starting in the lowest imaginable place, Hell, and ending in the highest place possible, Heaven.

Dante the Pilgrim<sup>2</sup> recognizes the significant rise in this journey, going so far as to take it upon himself to share this new height, as the first thing he says in the *Paradiso* are, “I saw things that he who from that height descends, forgets, or cannot speak; for nearing its desired end, our intellect sinks into an abyss so deep that memory fails to follow it.” (*Paradiso* 1, 5-9). He is entering a place so great, so magnificent, so breathtaking, that human faculties like memory begin to fail: it is too much for humans to grasp. So, he prays to Apollo to help him remember and be able to share what he sees: “Nevertheless, as mas as I, within my mind, could treasure of the holy kingdom shall now become the matter of my song. O good Apollo, of this final takes make me the vessel of your excellence, what you, to merit your loved laurel, ask.” (*Paradiso*, 1,10-15).

But compare this to the beginning of the *Comedy* in the first Canto of the *Inferno*, and we get a quite different description and emotion: “within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost. Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say what was this forest savage, rough, and stern, which in the very thought renews the fear. So bitter is it, death is little more” (*Inferno* 1, 3-7). Furthermore, throughout the *Inferno*, there are many other instances that perpetuate this same misery and hopelessness, with the most famous one being the inscribed message on the gate of Hell: “Through me the way into the suffering city, through me the way to the eternal pain, through me eth way that runs among the lost. [...] abandon every hope, who enter here” (*Inferno* 3, 1-3,9). Needless to say, the *Divine Comedy* gets its name from its structure by starting in a place of fear and hopelessness and ending on the highest of notes.

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the *Comedy*, there are two *Dantes*, Dante the Poet, the real-world author who occasionally interjects in the story, and Dante the Pilgrim, the character who travels through the afterlife and whose adventures are chronicled in the *Divine Comedy*

## 2. Horror's Traits

Dante's *Inferno* includes many of the traits that are part of the contemporary Horror genre. Horror is a confusing genre at first glance; the stories do not necessarily need a *happy ending*, such as Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", but others do include them, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, so they are not in alignment with Dante's vision for what separates a Tragedy and a Comedy, giving Horror a space for itself. But Horror works in the same way as both kinds of works by creating "a certain affect" (Carroll 14) in its audience. Much like how a suspense movie raises tension and uncertainty in their viewer and how a mystery story sparks curiosity and intrigue in its reader, a work of Horror aims to strike *fear* and *disgust* in their reader, creating a feeling of repulsiveness and, of course, horror. To accomplish this, story tellers find ways for the audience to relate to the emotions the *positive* characters, such as the protagonist or supporting cast, have throughout the narrative. Thus, "our responses are meant, ideally, to parallel those characters" (Carroll 18). In other words, readers can relate, but do not necessarily have to replicate or duplicate, the emotions of the non-malign characters in the literature. Think of it like this, the reason we are scared when we, say, watch a horror movie is because the positive characters are scared too. We as the audience see their emotions, see what they are going through, and mirror those emotions in our empathy, so we become scared too.

Horror narratives accomplish these emotions in the positive characters through the introduction of Monsters. Monsters work by striking the extreme emotions of fear and disgust in the positive characters by their presence, fearing what they are capable of. Stories like Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and H.G. Well's "The Sea Raiders" spark disgust and fear in their

protagonists—Victor Frankenstein says to himself right after awakening his creation, “now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart.” (Shelley 92), and the narrator in “The Sea Raiders” notes Mr. Fison’s reaction on seeing the sea monsters, saying “he was horrified, of course, and intensely excited and indignant, at such revolting creatures preying upon human flesh” (Wells 2)—allowing the reader to understand what characters see and feel, fearing and revolting over the same fearsome and revolting thing.

Some non-ordinary physical state of agitation is caused by the thought of the monster [...] The audience thinking of a monster is prompted in this response by the response of the fictional human characters whose actions they are attending to, and that audience, like said characters, may also wish to avoid physical contact with such things as monsters.

The audience’s psychological state, therefore, diverges from the psychological state of characters with respect to belief, but converge on that of characters with respect to the way in which the properties of said monsters are emotionally assessed (Carroll 35)

So what makes these feelings and emotions so powerful is how rare they are in everyday life—it is not every day where a monster goes on a rampage in your neighborhood streets—as Angela Ndalians, a professor at the Swinburn University of Technology, points out how the monster’s mere presence jeopardizes the *status quo* (25) because of both the newfound change in the environment and the drastic response to it. Monsters force the positive characters to undergo extreme circumstances, testing their limits, and, most importantly, terrifying them. The monster



must terrify the positive characters, because without this fear, the audience would not relate or mirror the fear in the characters if they have none to begin with<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The Monster in the *Inferno*

The *Inferno* also includes these properties of Horror that Carroll examines as well, and thus also creates the same effects of Horror literature in its readers. As mentioned before, Dante the Pilgrim expresses fears in the first canto in the *Inferno*<sup>4</sup>, worrying about where he found himself. The Monster in *Inferno* is quite cleverly the environment Dante travels through in his journey through Hell. Not in a remarkable social commentary way as Jordan Peele's *Get Out* accomplishes, but because of the grotesque and painful environment Dante encounters as he marches through Hell. For instance, the Third Circle of Hell is the home of Cerberus who is the warden over all the souls punished in that ring. Dante the Pilgrim, when seeing him for the first time, calls him a "monster cruel and uncouth, With his three gullets like a dog is barking [...] Red eyes he has, and unctuous beard and black, And belly large, and armed with claws his hands; He rends the spirits, flays, and quarters them" (*Inferno* 6, 13-14, 16-18). Cerberus is horrific, stern, and overbearing with his terrifying eyes and cruel behavior. But the punishment themselves are also the monster, with the Flatterers in the Eighth Ring of Hell living in ditches full of "pungent sauces" (*Inferno* 18, 51)<sup>5</sup>. The mere thought of what these souls of going through is revolting, satisfying the *disgust* characteristic of a monster in a work of Horror. But of

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<sup>3</sup> Which why merely including a monster, such as Guillermo del Toro's *The Shape of Water*, does not automatically make it a work of horror. The monster must bring along an atmosphere of fear and/or disgust into the narrative as well.

<sup>4</sup> "Within a forest dark, for the straightforward pathway had been lost. Ah me! how hard a thing it is to say what was this forest savage, rough, and stern, which in the very thought renews the fear. So bitter is it, death is little more" *Inferno*, 1, 3-7

<sup>5</sup> The euphemism is a more appropriate way to say that the souls there were bathing in their own excrement

course, the final monster in the *Inferno* perfectly embodies the two elements terror and disgust: the *Emperor of Hell*, the *Devil*. The Pilgrim describes the Devil's gargantuan size as, "better with a giant I compare than do the giants with those arms of his" (*Inferno* 34, 30-31), his frightening head, "I beheld three faces on his head!" (*Inferno* 34, 38), and wings "of a bat" (*Inferno* 34, 49). Such a foul creature, that when Dante the Pilgrim first sees him in the Ninth and Last Circle of Hell, he freezes, and recalls "Now was I, and with fear in verse I put it" (*Inferno* 34, 10). The entire setting of the *Inferno* is the *Monster*, in both the demons who punish the damned souls in Hell and the punishments themselves, as the two create moments of terror and disgust throughout the *Inferno*.

#### 4. But what about *Purgatorio*?

There is something more about the *Inferno* that makes it so compelling and provocative, as we see entities and punishments just as terrifying and disgusting in the *Purgatorio*, but we aren't as moved as the souls and moments in that part of the *Divine Comedy* because of the two different messages and goals the realms operate on. As I mentioned before, the gates of Hell prominently show a message of hopelessness and despair, setting the expectations of every soul damned to Hell. But Purgatory's message is different, substituting despair with responsibility and hope, giving Purgatory's *Monster* a positive role. This is not to overshadow the fact that the souls in both realms are suffering immense and horrific pains, but that the punishments have different purposes. This is even shown at the onset of every punishment, where the type of punishment is different. Lust, for example, is punished in *Inferno* by being in a never-ending storm: "I reached a place where every light is muted, which bellows like the sea beneath a tempest, when it is battered by opposing winds. The hellish hurricane, which never rest, drives

on the spirits with its violence: wheeling and pounding, it harasses them.” (*Inferno*, 5, 28-33)

which is then an excess of their sin of lust by allowing their bodily appetite to move them around, so now the storm moves them around, “I learned that those who undergo this torment are damned because they sinned within the flesh, subjecting reason to the rule of lust. And as, in the cold season, stinging’s wings beat them along in broad and crowded ranks, so does that blast bear on the guilty spirits: now here, now there, now down, now up, it drives them” (*Inferno*, 5, 37-43).

But in Purgatory, the souls there are going through a sentence opposite of the associated sin. In the second terrace, for example, holds the souls going through the vice of envy, the vice of coveting another person’s belongings, purge that sin by living as beggars: “Those souls, it seemed, were cloaked in coarse haircloth; another’s shoulder served each shade as prop” and, more importantly, had “iron wire pierces and sews up the lids of all those shades” (*Purgatory*, 13, 58-59, 70-71). Being forced into blindness would mean that they could never envy another’s belongings because they could never see them, the antithesis to their vice. Thus, in Hell, they are suffering the excess of their sin. While in Purgatory, they are going through the antithesis of their sins. The purpose for these types of punishments is simple; they show why the people are in their realm. For those in Hell, they lived a life on earth in such an excess of vice that their punishment is an even greater, hyperbolic existence of the vice that brought them to hell. For those in Purgatory, they too lived a life with sin, but understood and genuinely believed in God but are nonetheless imperfect because of their sins. So, for those sins to be purged out of them, they have to live with the opposite of their sin for a while so that they can purge the sin out of them, getting used to life without it and being perfect so that they can enter into heaven.

But it is this last part here, *enter into heaven*, that is important for the souls in Purgatory. These souls have hope. They can be saved. They are on their own journeys to enter Heaven. The souls in Purgatory recognize it as well, as many souls, when seeing Dante pass through the realm, ask him to pray for them while they are in Purgatory, so much so that Dante the Poet, not the Pilgrim, interjects in Canto 11 to tell his readers that “If there they pray on our behalf, what can be said and done here on this earth for them by those whose wills are rooted in true worth? Indeed, we should help them to wash the stains they carried from this world, so that, made pure and light, they reach the starry wheel” (*Purgatorio*, 11,31-36). What Dante is saying is that we should pray for the souls in Purgatory to help make their march through Purgatory faster, shortening their sentence, and help them get into Heaven faster. This changes to tone from one that was doomed to one full of it because the souls in Purgatory have something to cling onto, hope.

Thus, we can see that even though Dante’s Hell and Purgatory have similar traits, similar *Monsters*, the tone of each book is remarkably different. So, while the Monster in Hell creates the feeling of despair, the Monster in Purgatory provides hope and justice, as the souls there can still enter into heaven and have something to look forward to. Purgatory is only part of the souls’ journeys to get into Heaven, but for the souls in Hell, they are trapped there without anything to look forward to.

##### 5. The introduction of Catharsis

So now, we have seen the elements of the *Inferno* that make it a Horror story with the story’s Monster being the grueling, unforgiving, and repulsing environment and atmosphere in Hell. But the contradictory question remains: why are we drawn to something that repulses us, to

something that scares us? The answer is that these raised emotions do something good in us by alleviating an inner tension, in a process known as Catharsis. If we remember what Carroll said a horror story does to our emotions, we relate to positive characters by mirroring what they feel throughout the narrative, namely fear and disgust, and our emotions are heightened to a level that we don't regularly have in everyday life. In normal scenarios, we would not want a monster to jump from a bush and scare us or be in a space full of despair and torture, but we enjoy stories that give us emotions as if it did happen. The answer is found in what happens after the fact, once these emotions calm down and leave us, as they have been *purged or purified* from our system by heightening them out in the first place, the process being Catharsis. Aristotle first coined the term in his *Poetics*—his work on literary and dramatic theory—and argues that a good literary work serves to help the audience *restore* an emotional equilibrium. Scholars are still debating whether Catharsis is the *purgation* or the *purification* of these negative emotions, but both definitions add a valuable insight into the process: “The term has been taken to mean either the ‘purgation’ of the emotions of pity and fear from the consciousness of the audience that witnesses the tragedy or as the ‘purification’ in a moral or ethical sense of these emotions” (Golden 51). Literary works serve as a catalyst for this as they evoke certain emotions the audience already have pent up inside them and give the audience an avenue to relieve these, now, overflowing emotions.

Imagine that we are a can of a carbonated drink of your choice, and the troubles and stress of the world slowly shake up the can over time, building up pressure. The pressure is rising, overflowing, and needing a safe way to vent out before bursting open. But wait, someone comes along and notices the can's bulging walls. They decide to do something about it by giving

the can one last hard shake and opening it, but only slightly, enough to only let out the gas and none of the soda. The pressure is gone, released, and soda is still perfectly contained in the can. This is what Catharsis is, a regulating of our emotions by pushing us to the edge before relieving our suppressed emotions in a *safe* manner. In a tragedy, for instance, the audience become saddened and distraught throughout the work, building up to the climax where they finally release these emotions, usually in tears and sadness. Works of horror function in the same way, as the audience's stifled emotions of fear and disgust are released when they experience these emotions in the safe environment of a movie, or in our case, a book.

What makes books a *safe* place to have and release these emotions is the fact that it is all kept inside the world of the literary work. Some gross and terrifying monster is not chasing the reader in any way but chasing the positive character and giving them fear and disgust. Since the readers are able to relate to the positive characters, they also mirror their emotions, but they are not in danger from the monster. Instead, readers can have the thrill of the ride without any of the risk. And once that ride is over, they experienced these emotions at an unnatural level that they vented out the internal pressure without the dangers that would cause those emotions to arise in the first place.

#### 6. Catharsis at Work in *Inferno*

The cathartic experience is, thus, also present in the *Inferno* as Dante manifest emotional responses between his relationship with Virgil and the souls they see in their voyage through Hell. Yes, I already commented on the horrific and disgusting atmosphere in Dante's Hell, but Dante's emotional response to his environment is what truly brings out how the Cathartic experience works in the *Inferno*. Dante the Pilgrim's confusion and terror in the first Canto of

the *Inferno* brings a desperate atmosphere with it that when he sees Virgil's silhouette, Dante's first words are, "Have pity on me [...] Whiche'er thou art, or shade or real man!" (*Inferno* 1, 65-66). Pity, the first sentence to come out of Dante's mouth is a plea for pity, and a desperate one as well as he did not care who the silhouette was, so long as they could help him out of the forest he found himself in. This desperation also elicits pity in its readers, as it provides them the reason Dante journeys through Hell in the first place, because he has "fear and anxiety to escape his own terrible plight." (Cranston 28), a tone that Dante shares as he accepts Virgil as his guide through the afterlife so that "I may escape this woe and worse" (*Inferno* 1, 132). Ultimately, it is Dante the Pilgrim's fear that motivates him, and it is our understanding of his fear that arises pity for him as we empathize with his emotions, starting the Cathartic experience.

As already discussed, Hell is full of gruesome and horrific punishments that the souls there have to endure because of their sentence, but one thing that Dante still struggles with throughout his journey through Hell is whether to have *pity* for them or not. Throughout the *Inferno*, Dante the Pilgrim talks to the souls in a sorry tone, such as when he enters the First Ring of Hell, which houses the lustful, Dante calls them "weary souls" (*Inferno* 5, 80), and Francesca, one of the souls in this ring of Hell, replies with "If were the King of the Universe our friend, We would pray unto him to give thee peace, Since thou hast *pity* on our woe perverse" (*Inferno* 5, 91-93, emphasis added). After hearing Francesca's lament, Dante tells her what he feels after hearing her words: "Thine agonies, Francesca, Sad and compassionate to weeping make me" (*Inferno* 5, 116-117). Dante has similar episodes and feelings with other souls in various other rings<sup>6</sup>. But Virgil gives Dante, who has at this point has been in tears after remembering all the pain he has seen (*Inferno* 20, 22-25), a harsh reminder why the souls are in Hell in the first place

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<sup>6</sup> See *Inferno* 6, 20-59; 13, 31-69; 15, 24-96

in Canto 20: “Art thou, too, of the other fools? Here pity lives when it is wholly dead; Who is a greater reprobate than he Who feels compassion at the doom divine? Lift up, lift up thy head, and see for whom Opened the earth before the Thebans’ eyes” (*Inferno* 20, 27-32). Dante, as well as us, are “reminded that pity in the traditional sense of compassion which we feel at the sight of something pathetic - without considering the justness of God's punishment - is a theological offence” (Cranston 38). Hell’s purpose, as portrayed in the *Inferno*, is to deliver Divine Justice to the sinners, deal punishments for people who *deserve* it because their worldly life led to their eternal consequences.

Yet, Dante cannot help but feel pity for them, which spurs the idea that his compassion for the damned challenges Divine Justice (Cranston 31), which is important in the cathartic experience because by feeling pity for a just punishment, it makes the punishment even more horrific as its merit is in question. We feel pity when we see someone going through a misfortune, but these people in Hell did not have a misfortune; their deliberate actions on earth led them to their painful consequence. So having pity for them *clouds* this reminder that these people deserved it, and it makes the punishments feel unjust when, under the Dantean framework, they are not, and it is this *clouding* that make us also feel pity for the souls, an emotion that builds up in us through the Cathartic experience.

Thus, the *Inferno* brings up emotions within its readers through its self-reflective experience within us. Dante the Pilgrim’s fear and disgust is well known at this point, seen in his reactions and dialogue while passing through Hell, as he sees the *Monster*—the punishments the souls go through—and describes it in great detail, but Dante’s pity elevates his emotions because it muddles the perception of Hell, from one of Divinely punishing the unjust to one of souls who are in need of mercy, which we the readers also forget with Dante as our narrator and main



source for emotional reactions in the *Inferno*. Hence, because Dante is full of extreme emotions that are spurred on by his pity for the souls punished by *Inferno*'s monster, we the reader relate to Dante, mirroring his emotions within ourselves, mirroring the fear, disgust, and pity he has. But once we put the book down, we can acknowledge that we too have gone on our own journey by safely experiencing extreme emotions without any of the risks, or in this case, without having to travel through Hell.

## 7. Closing Remarks

In conclusion, we enjoy works of horror because of how they help regulate our emotions, helping relieve tension by feeling fear and disgust without actually having to be in a real-world situation where we have those feelings. We are not actually being chased by a monster and live in a revolting world, but we can enter it through works of horror, expressing these repressed feelings by relating to the positive characters' own fear and disgust. And once the story is over, our emotional state has experienced such a rollercoaster of emotions that our *normal* states get a newfound appreciation because it lacks the extreme emotions we experienced in the work of horror. So, it is ok to reach for your bookshelf and pop open that horror book; it is good for emotional balance, helping the reader vent out suppressed emotions.

KETZALT E. MARQUEZ

## Appendix

Presented at Honors Symposium May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2023

My field of study for the past four years has been English Literature, where I studied, read, and (for the most part) enjoyed many, many, *many* stories. Through my years of study, there has always been this one deeply influential, informative, and, quite frankly, disturbing work that has captivated me all these years: Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. The Comedy itself is cemented in the literary canon, chronicling Comedy's protagonist Dante the Pilgrim's journey through the afterlife. But the first place he must venture through is the most brutal and horrific place imaginable: Hell, as told in the *Inferno*. The *Inferno's* brutal and terrifying atmosphere is what makes it a work of Horror, filled with punishments and characters that we would never want to meet. Yet when presented with an opportunity, some of us, including myself, voluntarily participate in works of Horror, we enjoy them, we *indulge* in them. So, there is an inner tension between what we desire in the real world and what we enjoy in fiction. At first glance, it seems to be wrong that we enjoy and take pleasure in depictions of pain, suffering, and Horror because of what that says about our moral character. In real life, it is morally bad to take pleasure in these kinds of things, and a sign of a morally bad character. For example, one might recognize that if they enjoy the emotions they get from doing immoral acts, such as maliciously scaring and harming others, it is a sign that something is awry with their moral character. If not, others will notice these behaviors as well and try to stay away from them out of worry about what that person might do to them.

Yet, this kind of thinking is not the case when we participate in fiction. We don't see someone who is, say, studying Dante and think to ourselves "What is going on in their head?", at least I hope so for my sake. Nonetheless, this distinction needs an explanation, what is it about a work of Horror that makes it both permissible to enjoy and captivating? Why do we enjoy something that is supposed to scare us away? My answer to this struggle is this: when we participate in Horror, whether that be a literary work, film, poem, or any other work, we as the audience mirror the emotions, fear, and disgust in the story and then are able to safely release these emotions when we step outside of the work in a process known as Catharsis.

## 2) Defining Horror:

But first, we need a proper clarification for what the field of Horror is and what it does in people before we can see how it works its *magic* in Dante's work. Horror as a genre has situated its place in our culture in an undoubtedly phenomenal fashion. From the movies we have in our theatres, the countless podcasts on the internet for us to listen to, and an even greater amount of literary works out there waiting to be read: there's a mass market for Horror.

Similar to how a suspense movie raises tension in its viewers and how a mystery novel sparks curiosity in its reader, a work of Horror is no different. We feel that chill in our spine as we become uneasy with every passing moment, and for some of us, our knees become weak, and our palms start growing sweaty. We get scared, frightened, disgusted; emotional marks that a work of Horror aims to strike in its audience. And it is these emotions that make it one of the most perplexing genres. You see, we enjoy comedies because they help us feel good by the end of them by making us laugh; we like action films because they are fun to watch and create a

sense of awe in us. Yet, fright and disgust are not emotions most of us would want to purposely include in our everyday lives, yet we do exactly that when we participate in a work of Horror. Authors of Horror raise these emotions in us through the *Positive Characters*, such as the protagonist or supporting cast, as we see what they are going through in narrative, and thus, we also see their emotions—their disgust and fear—and are able to empathize with them, becoming scared because of it.

Horror narratives accomplish in producing these emotions in the positive characters through the introduction of Monsters. Monsters raise extreme emotions of fear and disgust in the characters through their presence and what those monsters do to other characters, thus the positive characters begin fearing what the monsters are capable of.

As Noel Carroll, a philosopher of art and philosophy, puts it:

Some non-ordinary physical state of agitation is caused by the thought of the monster [...] The audience thinking of a monster is prompted in this response by the response of the fictional human characters whose actions they are attending to, and that audience, like said characters, may also wish to avoid physical contact with such things as monsters. The audience's psychological state [...] converge on that of characters with respect to the way in which the properties of said monsters are emotionally assessed (Carroll 35)

So as the positive characters *gain* an emotional state of fear and disgust because of the monster's presence, we the audience see this, see their emotions, and through empathy, mirror the emotions the positive characters are going through.

And these monsters are in themselves effective in producing these emotions because they jeopardize the *status quo*, so the positive characters have to adapt to their new extreme environment, and the change produces their drastic response of fear and disgust, which we then see and mirror in our own emotional states, which is why we get scared when we participate in works of Horror.

### 3) Horror in the *Inferno*

The *Inferno* shares these elements of a monster, which is quite cleverly the entire setting of Hell that Dante travels through in his journey. The *Inferno* is Dante the Pilgrim's report of what he saw and experienced, passing through a grotesque and painful environment.

The *Inferno's* Monster is both the numerous punishments and wardens of Hell. In the Third Canto of the *Inferno*, Dante walks through the Infamous Gate of Hell, inscribed on it saying: "Through me the way into the suffering city, through me the way to the eternal pain, through me eth way that runs among the lost. [...] abandon every hope, who enter here" (*Inferno* 3, 1-3,9).

And that's just the front door of Hell, Chilling, is it not? Furthermore, the punishments themselves are of course terrifying to look at, as Dante sees "blasphemers [...] hung by their tongues, adulterous women were suspended by their hair over bubbling mire, murderers were cast into snake pits" (Thomas G. Bergin, 8), and the Flatterers in the Eighth Ring of Hell living

in trenches full of "pungent sauces" (*Inferno* 18, 51). The mere thought of what these souls of going through is revolting and terrifying, satisfying the *disgust and fear* characteristics a monster brings in a work of Horror. And this monster is ever present in the *Inferno*, from the beginning of the work to the very last canto, as the last thing Dante sees before he leaves the realm is *the Emperor of Hell himself*, the *Devil*. Such a foul creature that when Dante the Pilgrim first sees him in the Ninth and Last Circle of Hell, he freezes, and recalls "Now was I, and with fear in verse I put it" (*Inferno* 34, 10), and describes the Devil's gargantuan size as, "better with a giant I compare than do the giants with those arms of his" (*Inferno* 34, 30-31), his frightening "three faces on his head!" (*Inferno* 34, 38), and wings "of a bat" (*Inferno* 34, 49). This last monster perfectly embodies both elements of fear and disgust through the grotesque description. Thus, the entire setting of the *Inferno* is the *Monster*, in both the demons who punish the damned souls in Hell and the punishments themselves, as the two create moments of terror and disgust throughout the *Inferno*, delivering a grueling, unforgiving, and repulsing environment and atmosphere in Hell.

#### 4) Intro to Catharsis

But the paradoxical question still remains: why are we drawn to something that repulses us, something that scares us? The answer is that these raised emotions do something good in us by alleviating inner tension, in a process known as Catharsis. If we remember what Carroll said a horror story does to our emotions, we, the audience, are able to relate with positive characters by mirroring what they feel throughout the narrative, mirroring their fear and disgust. Our emotions then become heightened to a level that we don't regularly have in our everyday lives. But it is

what happens after the fact, once these extreme emotions have calmed down and left us, where our answer is found. You see, as our emotional state returns to its normal equilibrium when we exit the work of Horror, we purge or purify the negative emotions we have felt, with literary works such as *The Inferno* proving to be a perfect catalyst for this.

Catharsis then is the process of expelling these negative emotions from our system because a work is able to safely produce these emotions within us.

Imagine that we are a can of a carbonated drink of your choice, and the troubles and stress of the world slowly shake up the can over time, building up pressure. The pressure is rising, overflowing, and needing a safe way to vent out before bursting open. But wait, someone comes along and notices the can's bulging walls. They decide to do something about it by giving the can one last hard shake and opening it, but only slightly, enough to only let out the gas and none of the soda. The pressure is gone, released, and soda is still perfectly contained in the can. This is what Catharsis is, a regulating of our emotions by pushing us to the edge before relieving our suppressed emotions in a *safe* manner

And this is the important part: safe. And what makes books, like *The Inferno* a *safe* place to have and release these emotions is the fact that it is all kept inside the world of the literary work. Some gross and terrifying monster is not chasing the reader, but chasing the positive character and giving them fear and disgust. Since the readers are able to relate to the positive characters, they are also able to mirror their emotions, but they are not in any real danger from the monster. Instead, readers can have the thrill of the ride without any of the risks. And once that ride is over, the

reader has experienced these emotions at an unnatural level that they were able to vent out the internal pressure without the dangers that would cause those emotions to arise in the first place.

So now, not only have we returned to our normal emotional state, but we get a reminder to recognize and appreciate where we are now. When participating in a work of Horror, one's emotional state is a *low* throughout the work, giving us something to compare our normal emotional state when we come out of it.

##### 5) Catharsis at work in the Inferno

As a work of Horror, the cathartic experience is also present in the *Inferno*, as Dante's emotional responses with the souls he sees creates a conflicting sense of pity for them. He calls the souls in Hell weary, compassionate, and cries for them because he pities the gruesome environment they have to call home. But it is, well, wrong to have pity for these souls in Hell Dante's guide, Virgil, gives him a harsh reminder that these souls are in Hell because, to put it bluntly, they deserve it. These people lived vicious lives on earth, turning their back on God in pursuit of their own interests, falling to sin and vice, and the consequence for such a lifelong pursuit was eternal punishment in Hell.

Yet, Dante cannot help but feel pity for them, which spurs the idea that his compassion for the damned challenges Divine Justice (Cranston 31), which is important in the cathartic experience because by feeling pity for a just punishment, it makes the punishment even more horrific as it questions the punishment's merit. In everyday life we feel pity when we see someone going



through a misfortune, but these people in Hell did not have a misfortune; their deliberate actions on earth led them to their painful consequence. So having pity for them clouds this reminder that these people deserved it, and it makes the punishments feel unjust when, under the Dantean framework, they are not, and it is this clouding that make us also feel pity for the souls, an emotion that builds up in us through the Cathartic experience.

Thus, we are able to appreciate Horror for its ability to help us relieve tension by feeling fear and disgust without actually having to be in a real-world situation where we have those feelings. We are not actually being chased by a monster and live in a revolting world, but we can enter it through works of horror, expressing these repressed feelings by relating to the positive characters' own fear and disgust. And once the story is over, our emotional state has experienced such a rollercoaster of emotions that our *normal* states get a newfound appreciation because it lacks the extreme emotions we experienced in the work of horror. So, it is ok to reach for your bookshelf and pop open that horror book; it is good for emotional balance, helping the reader vent out suppressed emotions. And if anyone is looking for recommendations, I have a great book to recommend recommendations.

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