

English Midterm Response #4

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In *Inferno*, Dante Alighieri takes the reader on a beautiful, yet frightening journey through the various levels of Hell, as a reminder to not only the Christian people, but in a way to himself, that breaking from the Path of God allows for an eternity in this wasteland that is the underworld. Dante uses a various array of characters from a wide variety of backgrounds to demonstrate the severe wretchedness that is Hell itself and what awaits sinners in the afterlife if they are not careful. The various sinners that the reader, and Dante himself, meet along the journey through Hell can be found in classical literature, ancient history, and Greek mythology that both pre-date and are contemporary with Dante's existence, evoking these characters to make parallels and send numerous messages to his audience. One message being that Hell itself, and sin is all encompassing; no man, creature, or even spiritual figure is exempt from the severity and desperation of Hell. These Pagans all bring different messages, stories, and inevitably lessons to Dante and his readers to learn from, but the use of their collective presence in the *Inferno* is to even further establish this level of fear within his audience, and attest to the harshness of Hell. No living creature is exempt from Hell; just like God is the Alpha and Omega, beginning and the end, the depths of the Underworld are just as ambient, also the beginning and the end, and a real threat to any and all sinners.

Among the significant characters that Dante encounters in his journey through the Underworld, is the mythical creature of Medusa and her posse of Furies. These furies encountered Dante and Virgil before they entered the City of Dis, or Lower Hell. Dante has these creatures come to exasperate the poets in Canto Nine before their entrance into the city as a

way to symbolize the extremity of entering this next level of the Underworld, and the dangers that could lie ahead, should Dante continue without his guide and protector, Virgil. These creatures are half woman, half serpent, each of the three women speckled with blood, with lower halves of their body covered in dark green serpents, with numerous horned vipers filling their hair. These furies soon call on Medusa, another significant mythological creature with the evil power to turn any man to stone if they glance at her face. One necessarily wouldn't associate these creatures with that of a Christian version of Hell, but Dante found their presence, along with numerous other mythical creatures, crucial in the message of the poem. The surface level message brought to the poets by these creatures is simple; the message is that Dante is not to walk through Hell without a guide, he is only a mortal man, and cannot defend himself against the dangers of the Underworld alone, but the greater message of their role in the plot is more ambiguous, and up to the reader. I attest that these dangerous creatures come in contact with these travellers in a way to be a warning against the severity of what they are going to see along their journey. These tortured souls will be something that Dante will never be able to unsee, and if he chooses to continue, he must also accept the fate of his future, and that he will always bear the burden of this journey.

When it comes to invoking characters from classical literature, Dante writes both Ulysses and Diomedes into his poem, and focuses on their sin, that of fraud, and their involvement in the Wooden Horse scandal during the Trojan War. In Dante's version of Hell, the sin of Fraudulence is of the highest severity. In Canto 26, Dante and Virgil encounter the souls who are eternally burning in flames, and Dante brings focus to the flames that are conjoined, soon learning that there lies the souls of both Ulysses and Diomedes for their sins associated with that

of fraudulence, or using their intelligence to lie, trick, and deceive another, making them “evil counselors” in the eye of God and in the context of Hell. These two sinners are found in the deepest layers of Hell, making their sins the most extreme. While their sins were on the basis of fraudulence, their use of fraud was for the purpose of winning a war, their deceit was of the enemy, something necessary for one to win a war. This raises the question, is war condemned by God? I attest that the presence of these men in Hell are to make the reader question what constitutes a “true sin” that would allow for a man to be condemned to the depths of Hell for all eternity. Their sins are not one of extreme oblivion, there are certainly some blurred lines when it comes to their actions, and with them, their motives, but in the end, they both lie in fiery Hell for eternity. This raises questions within the reader and most likely doesn’t sit well with the audience; this has a purpose within the poem, and one can truly find the common theme of an underlying fear emerging in the reader through the presence of these men, and others just like them.

Among the invocation of different characters, the reader comes across a number of historical figures who have found their way to an eternity of Hell. In Canto 34, Dante and Virgil encounter three significant men in the mouths of the three headed monster that is Lucifer, King of the Underworld. On both the left and the right, Dante sees Brutus and Cassius, the men who murdered and betrayed Julius Caesar in the Roman Senate. These men are considered two out of three of the greatest sinners ever, as they are examples of the most deserved traitors of all time, as they meet their fate by being torn to shreds by Lucifer, but never dying for eternity. The man in the middle is Judas, the man who betrayed Jesus Christ himself. The reader cannot help but ask the question, “does Dante and other Roman contemporaries place the betrayal of Judas and

the betrayal of Brutus and Cassius of the same importance?” This makes a significant point about the importance of Julius Caesar in Roman culture as Dante deemed his betrayal as sinful as that of the betrayal of Jesus Christ. Immediately after Dante sees these men in the mouths of Lucifer, Virgil exclaims that now, they have seen everything and they must leave immediately, further signifying the importance of these sinners, and the true severity of their sins, being that their contrapasso is the end of line. I attest that existence of these men in the plot of the poem is to symbolize the great importance of Roman history; it is so important that the fate of these men lies equal with the greatest betrayer of all time. And above all, along with all of the other sinners that Dante and Virgil encounter, their presence is to invoke fear within the reader, and fear of their fate, if they shall fall short of the path of God.

Dante Alighieri implemented the use of a number of various characters within his poem to really emphasize not only the severity, but also the all encompassing and completely unforgiving nature of Hell. Dante invokes pagans in all forms, including classic Christian sinners, mythological creatures, characters from classical literature, and significant people from history - all to demonstrate how Hell can be known as “the great equalizer”. While each of the people that Dante encounter along his journey share their own individual messages and their own warning cry, it is the idea that the author chose to implement all three of these *types* of character that is significant. At the base of each type of character, the author appeals to the reader’s sense of fear, as Dante most likely had fear within himself as well as he began to question his own faith. In the end, the invocation of these various characters makes a symbolic parallel between the idea of Hell, and that no one, not mythological creatures, not historical figures, and not characters from classical literature, are exempt from its reach.

Pledge:

I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.

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