

The Influence of Dante's *Divine Comedy* as seen through Dante's *Inferno* and media.

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Introduction

Let me share a little about myself. My grandmother is a cherished person in my life, someone who has always been there for me and whom I deeply admire. Her parents are originally from Italy, and she grew up speaking Italian and Spanish in Mexico where she was born. Unfortunately, she suffered from amnesia in her late teens, and as a result, she lost many memories, including her ability to speak Italian altogether. This has always saddened me, and it has long motivated me to explore my family's roots and culture.

Growing up, I spent a significant amount of time at church, where I participated in various activities and events related to my faith. This upbringing provided a strong foundation for my beliefs, but it also left me with many questions about the afterlife and the meaning of our existence. As a result, I became very fascinated by expressions of these topics in art and literature.

Given my interest in the arts and humanities and my deep interest for my heritage and the afterlife, I decided to pursue these interests in college. I took multiple courses at Wellesley College, a consortium member of Olin College where I attend, related to the Italian language, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the formation of Italy through literature. One of the most fascinating and unforgettable courses I took was on Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, a true masterpiece that has forever shaped the Italian language and people's views on the afterlife, inspiring countless artists since.

The Divine Comedy holds a special place in my heart due to both my grandma's influence and my religious upbringing. It satisfies my craving to learn about Italian culture and ponder the afterlife, topics that have always fascinated me. The work has been depicted and referenced countless times, and it has truly shaped the Italian language and people's views on the afterlife,

inspiring countless artists since. During my research on Dante, I stumbled upon William Adolphe Bouguereau, a classical French painter from the late 1800s/early 1900s, who created a stunning piece called *Dante and Virgil in Hell*. Seeing this painting reignited my love for Dante's work, and I feel excited to continue exploring Italian culture and the afterlife through this lens.

Dante and Virgil in Hell

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a trilogy that follows the journey of Dante the pilgrim and his guide, Virgil, as they traverse through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven to learn about God's love and the meaning of a righteous life. *Inferno*, the first book in the series explores the concept of "contrapasso," where sinners in the afterlife face eternal punishment that matches or contrasts their sins (Dante, Durling et al., pg.448).

William A. Bouguereau, a renowned French painter, submitted a particular scene from

Inferno, depicting Dante and Virgil's journey through Hell, to the Prix de Rome, a prestigious art competition. Bouguereau's painting is striking in its understanding of Dante's work and the importance of punishment in *Inferno*. It is a masterpiece that mesmerized me and stays true to the source material, and I feel that it would be a sin in and of itself to overlook this painting in any discussion of the *Inferno*.

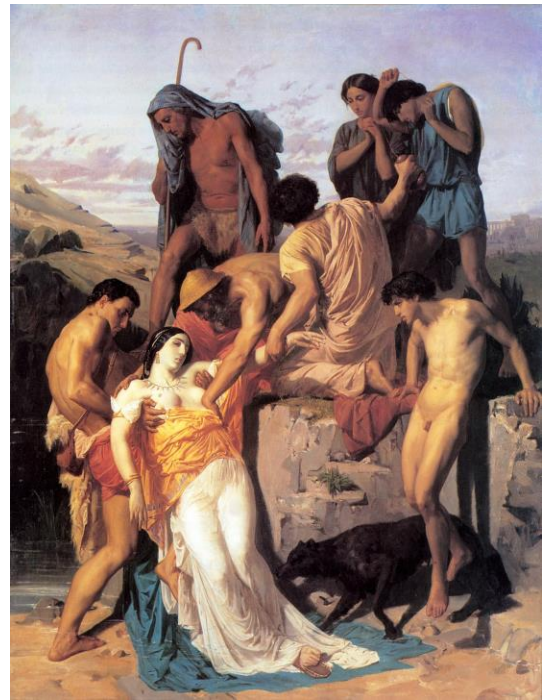


William Adolphe Bouguereau, *Dante and Virgil in Hell*. 1850. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

William Adolphe Bouguereau

Looking a bit into the artist's life, William Adolphe Bouguereau was born November 30, 1825, in La Rochelle, Kingdom of France. He grew up with a religious influence that led him to appreciate nature, art, and religion, but decided he wanted to pursue priesthood. To do so, he enrolled in a Catholic College and encountered his first lessons about making art. Ultimately, he decided against priesthood and began his adventure into art that led him to attending multiple schools that would teach him enough to earn a place at the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, a prestigious art academy in France known for influencing the best academic painters.

During Bouguereau's tenure at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, he was inspired to enter the prestigious Prix de Rome competition. His hope was to earn the opportunity to study at the Villa Medici in Italy, a place of great renown that would provide him with invaluable insight into some of the greatest masterpieces and their inner workings. Remarkably, on his third year of attempts, Bouguereau emerged victorious with joint first place, though not with his painting *Dante and Virgil in Hell*. He had submitted



William Adolphe Bouguereau, Shepherds Find Zenobia on the Banks of the Araxes. 1850. Oil on canvas. École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts

this work, as well as another painting titled *Shepherds Find Zenobia on the Banks of the Araxes*, and the latter ultimately won him the contest (Bartoli et al.).



William A. Bouguereau,
Song of the Angels. 1881.
Oil on canvas. Forest Lawn
Museum



William A. Bouguereau, *The Little Knitter*. 1882. Oil on
Canvas. Appleton Museum
of Art



William A. Bouguereau,
Love's Secrets. 1896. Private
Collection

Looking back on his works overall, they all possess an innate beauty and technical detail in composition that rivals most any other academic painter. With a strong talent for academic art, he was renowned during his time and sought after to be director of many art institutions. Much of his art depicted similar subjects relating to women, religious subjects, or fae creatures.

Interestingly, *Dante and Virgil in Hell* was the only work that William Adolphe Bouguereau ever created with such dark imagery and tones. He did create a few other darker pieces, such as *Les remords d'Oreste (The Remorse of Orestes)* and *Bacchante lutinant une chevre (Bacchante Teasing a Goat)*, but they mainly share only a similar composition in the lighting of the piece and the accentuated poses of the subjects. Ultimately, these two works were just a small fraction of the over 800 pieces of artwork he created in his lifetime. *Dante and Virgil in Hell* was a contest piece created with the hope of winning over a particular judge who had a deep interest in Dante, but it ultimately failed to do so. Given that this was still early in his career

in 1850, it's unclear whether the loss he experienced by trying to break out of his comfort zone into darker imagery was a factor in his decision to not continue painting in this style.



William A. Bouguereau, 1862. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts de Bordeaux, Bordeaux



William A. Bouguereau, Orestes Pursued by the Furies. 1862. Chrysler Museum of Art

Ultimately William Adolphe Bouguereau is an amazing painter of his time, who may have been repetitive in his style and subjects but was truly a master of his craft. Unfortunately for Bouguereau, he was prominent during the time when impressionist art began gaining traction, (artists such as Claude Monet, Pierre Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and many more). Because of this trending new ideology about breaking the rules of academic painting that Bouguereau had become a master at, painters and consumers of art began to shun and disapprove of his work. Seeing as he was one of the most prolific academic painters of the time, the idea and thought of “you paint like Bouguereau” became almost commonplace as a derogatory attack (Bartoli et al.). This unfortunate timing has drowned out his works to the point where most people don’t know who he is. He is not for everyone, but he still deserves to be remembered greatly for his amazing works and the timeless homage to Dante’s *Inferno*, *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, even if it was just an attempt to win a contest.

Dante Alighieri

To fully understand *The Divine Comedy*, it is important to learn about and understand its author, Dante Alighieri. He was born Durante degli Alighieri in 1265 in Florence, Italy, to a wealthy family. Dante received a prestigious education and became a highly educated individual who would go on to write many amazing pieces of literature and influence many people during his time and for centuries after.

Dante's family was proudly of Roman descent and was involved in the political climate of Florence. In 1295, Dante began his political career, using his fortunate upbringing and familial status to his advantage. He later earned himself a spot as one of the six priors of Florence, the highest political position in the city, in 1300. However, this would not last long, as in 1302, a mighty power-shift would come from the Black Guelphs, and he would be banished from Florence for his membership in the opposing White Guelphs (Celano) (Dante, Durling et al. *Introduction*).

The Black Guelphs, also known as just the Guelfs, was a political party/movement that was supported by the Papacy in the region. Inversely, the White Guelphs, also known as the Ghibellines, were the opposing political party that believed in the Holy Roman Empire as the rulers and law of the region. Civil disputes from both sides lasted for a few hundred years in the area until an unstoppable push from the Guelfs to have the Papacy be the ruling body of the region drove many Ghibelline leaders and supporters out of their homes (Dante, Durling et al. *Introduction*).

Dante's family was of Roman descent, which meant that he was a strong proponent of the Ghibellines and in turn was exiled in 1302 when the Guelf faction shifted the power dynamic in Florence. His banishment from Florence would later be increased to a death sentence if he ever

tried to enter the city again. He would eventually end up in Verona for a few years, then in Ravenna where he passed away at the age of 56 in 1321 due to malaria.

The period after his banishment is when it is believed that Dante began writing his masterpiece *La Commedia* and finished during stay in Verona in 1312-1318. The word “divine” was later added to the book’s title by Giovanni Boccaccio, an Italian writer born in 1313 who admired Dante and emulated his style in some of his work. Boccaccio was what we would now call a number one fan of Dante and the first great scholar on the masterpiece (Celano)(Dante, Durling et al.).

The Divine Comedy was Dante’s magnum opus that he poured his soul into. He created an everlasting piece of literature that influenced many to come. Notably, this isn’t the only writing he ever published. He had two other notable works known as *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*) and *Convivio* (*The Banquet*). *La Vita Nuova* was a small book with a collection of prose and verse intertwined with each other and with a focus on Beatrice, a girl he met when he was nine that forever changed him by her beauty. In real life, he only ran into Beatrice a few times and never even made a strong effort to approach and court her, but he would never stop regarding her as his true love and the ultimate example of beauty. She is heavily important to Dante and most of his works.

In *The Divine Comedy* Beatrice is the angel that explains to Dante his journey at the start of *Inferno* and the one who guides him in *Paradiso*. Further, in *La Vita Nuova*, Dante unravels his sentiment on his love for Beatrice, and in *Convivio* he focuses on her. In *Convivio*, a 4-part book series, each book touches on Dante’s History and thoughts on certain topics such as souls, existence, nobility, his love for Beatrice, and more. It was partially unfinished but was also a strong component in further growing the Italian dialect, as was *La Divine Commedia*, and having

people ponder deep subjects about life. Ultimately Dante made Beatrice his muse for a lot of his work, but he also grabbed heavily from his personal life many other friends, enemies, and family can be found in *The Divine Comedy*.

The Divine Comedy

The Divine Comedy is Dante's masterpiece that he finished in the early 1300's, and to this day it is considered by many to be one of the most influential books in Italian history. It was one of the very first major works of literature to use what became the Italian language. During this period, Italy as a country was non-existent and instead existed as various regions, each with their own dialects and socio-political identities. The idea of a unifying dialect known as Italian was still relatively young, and by writing in the Florentine dialect primarily, Dante's work helped establish a unifying Italian language that readers needed to learn to understand his writing (Celano).

Dante was a very learned scholar and a master of his craft. Using his prowess, he took a young language and formed not only a compelling story analyzing people's perspectives of their way of life, but a poetic beauty. *The Divine Comedy* Dante uses a rhyming scheme that Dante invented known as "terza rima", or "triple rhyme" (Dante, Durling et al., pg.20). Each chapter is called a "Canto" and consists of a collection of three-line stanzas. In each stanza the first- and third-line rhyme, and the second line rhymes with the first and third line of the next stanza, and so on.

Excerpt from Dante's *Inferno Canto I - 1:6*. The first Canto of *Inferno* is one of the most well-known and memorized parts of the whole *Comedy*. Here is also a prime example of terza rima in the highlighted words in Italian. English translation Robert M. Durling

“Nel Mezzo del cammin di nostra **vita** (A)

mi ritrovai per una selva **oscura**, (B)

ché la diritta via era **smarrita**. (A)

Ahi quanto a dir qual'era è cosa **dura** (B)

Esta selva selvaggia a aspra e **forte** (C)

Che nel pensier rinnova la **paura!**” (B)

“In the middle of the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood,

for the straight way was lost.

Ah, how hard a thing it is to say what that wood was.

so savage and harsh and strong

that the thought of it renews my fear!”

By using this rhyming scheme, Dante created a structure that has a connected feeling. As you finish one stanza, the call back to the line in the previous stanza creates a sense of union throughout the work that propels the reader forward (Dante, Durling et al.). This systematic yet beautifully crafted style is in part why I feel *The Divine Comedy* to this day is one of the most technically impressive uses of the Italian language. Not only is the time that was put into this structure an impressive feat, considering the length of all 3 works combined, but the work is impressive from a metaphorical standpoint as well.

Dante's use of the “terza rima” style in *The Divine Comedy* was not only masterful, but also highlighted the religious significance of the Trinity in Christianity. The number three is invoked throughout the poem, with the three books and 33 cantos in each book. Significant events in the *Inferno* often occur in cantos divisible by three, reinforcing the idea of the Trinity. Dante also uses other numbers, such as seven, nine, and ten, symbolically throughout the work (Celano). The use of numerical symbolism is another impressive aspect of Dante's craft in *The Divine Comedy* and another reason why I personally find it to be a masterpiece.

The technical mastery and symbolism found in *The Divine Comedy* is still unmatched by most Italian literature today. Its importance and influence are so great that it is still taught and

referenced in the Italian education system. Even those who have not read it in full recognize its significance and its role in shaping Italian identity.

Inferno

Inferno is a captivating book, and the better-known of the three in *The Divine Comedy*: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. It delves deep into the concept of Hell, creating a vivid and fascinating depiction of this underworld. It was one of the earliest major literary works to explore this topic in depth, outside of religious texts like *The Bible*. Dante's views on the nature of Hell, who is punished there, and the purpose of Hell continue to influence popular culture today, with references found in songs, video games, artworks, and more. Even now, the notions and perspectives created by Dante about what Hell is like and who ends up in Hell remain relevant and widely referenced. (A brief list of various examples can be found below at the end.)

Inferno itself is about the treacherous journey Dante and Virgil take to learn about the punishment of sinners who lacked God's love. The journey starts at the end of Dante's life as he finds himself at the end of his life in a forest longing for his long dead love Beatrice. Here Virgil, a great Roman poet from long ago that Dante admired, comes to him as a specter to take him on a journey that has been willed by God. After getting acquainted, they proceed on a journey that will take them through the nine circles of Hell.

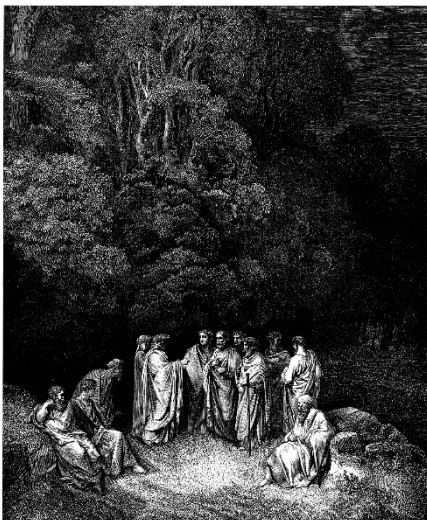
Hell itself is divided into nine circles that all funnel down to Lucifer and the entrance to purgatory. Each one of these circles is separated by a type of sin, such as the unbaptized, lust, greed, gluttony, wrath, and so on.



Sandro Botticelli, The Map of Hell. 1480-90. Engraving. Depicts the nine circles of Hell leading to Purgatory.

The major significance to structuring Hell like this, is that the structure enabled Dante to categorize sins and people he felt should belong in each of those circles. To bring life into his journey through Hell, Dante used countless references to real life people whom he adored and hated. The familiarity Dante presents as the protagonist when he encounters souls he once knew, or has long known about, added a depth to reading *Inferno* that made me feel like I was more invested in each circle and its inhabitants, than if they had been completely random people throughout Hell.

Circle 1: Limbo -The first circle of Hell is for the unbaptized and virtuous pagans. These souls are not punished but cannot enter heaven nor know God's love now.



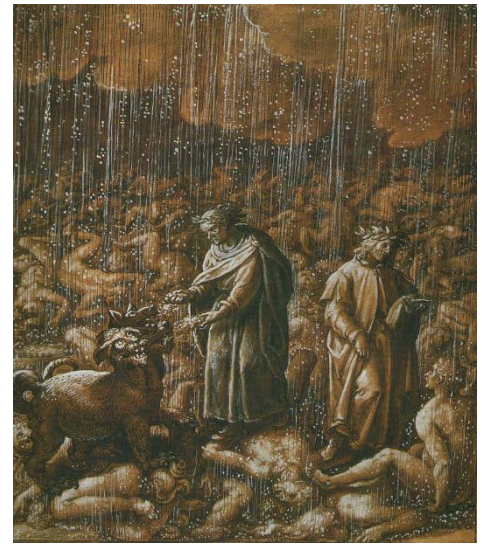
Gustave Doré, Plate 12(Canto IV - Limbo, Dante is accepted as an equal by the great Greek and Roman poets). 1857. Wood Engraving Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré



William Blake, The Circle of the Lustful: Paolo and Francesca. 1825-27. Engraving

Circle 2: Lust - The second circle of Hell is for the souls consumed by lust. They are perpetually blown around in strong jet streams unable to gain control of their bodies since they could not control them in life either.

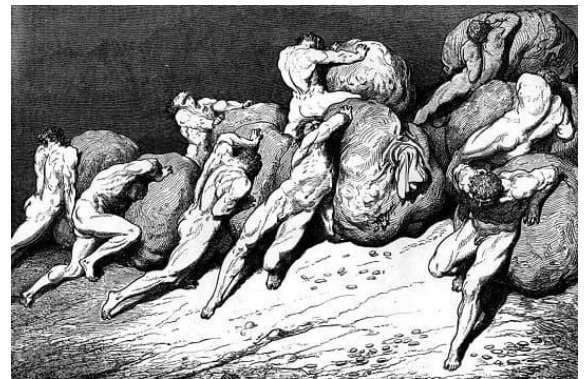
Circle 3: Gluttony - The third circle of Hell is for the souls of the gluttonous. They are forced to lie in a foul-smelling slush created by never ending icy rain that pours down on them. Because they indulged in a life surrounded by waste, they must now endure the same for eternity.



Stradano, Illustrations of Dante's Inferno: Canto 6. 1587. Copper Engraving

Circle 4: Greed -

The fourth circle of Hell is for the greedy, divided into two groups: hoarders and wasters, who are in a never-ending battle pushing enormous weights against each other. Their selfish drive is represented by an unwavering commitment to push boulders with all their



Gustave Doré, Punishment of the Avaricious and the Prodigal. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

might forever, creating a loss of identity and individuality.



Gustave Doré, Virgil confronting the devils outside the city of Dis. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

by it.

Circle 6: Heresy - The sixth circle holds heretics. They are imprisoned in burning tombs they can never escape for denying the immortality of the soul. The punishment of the heretics is to be trapped in their own false beliefs, just as they were trapped in their earthly life.

Circle 5: Wrath - In the fifth circle of Hell, those who were consumed by anger are punished by being submerged in a river of boiling blood and fire. Those who were actively angry are at the top fighting to stay afloat, and those who were passively angry are at the bottom drowned by the other souls. In life, they were driven by their anger, and they are now eternally consumed



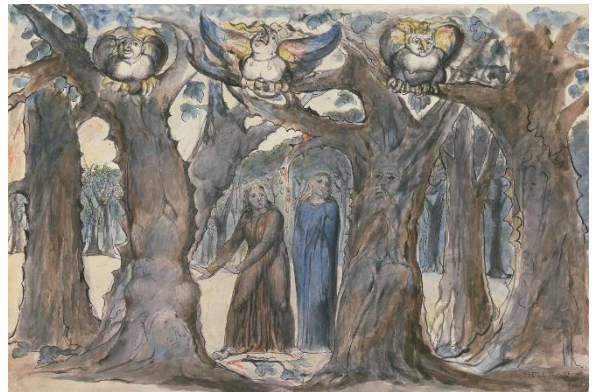
Gustave Doré, Dante and Virgil before Farinata. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

Circle 7: Violent - The circle of the violent is split into three rings: those who were violent to others (e.g., murder, conquest, etc.), those who were violent to themselves, and lastly those who were violent against God, art, or nature.



Gustave Doré, Virgil addressing the centaurs. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

Ring 1 (Violence to others): Souls here are in Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood, where they get to burn immersed in the bloodshed they indulged in life, while being shot by centaurs if they try to leave.



William Blake, The Wood of the Self-Murderers: The Harpies and the Suicides 1824-27. Ink and watercolor.

Ring 2 (Violence to themselves): Those physically violent to themselves are thorny trees and bushes attacked by harpies, which are winged spirits. Those violent to themselves by wasting money or property are chased by the harpies and hounds through the thorny forest. Punishment for them is the immersion of pain to themselves for the lack of immersion in taking care of themselves.

Ring 3 (Violence to God, art, or nature): Those violent to God, Art, or Nature exist here. Blasphemers were those that hurt God by speaking lies; Sodomites who hurt

the laws of nature; and Usurers who were violent to art, human creation, and labor. Here the blasphemers lie on the sand while the usurers sit, and the sodomites wander about in



groups. All of them are rained on with fire and brimstone as punishment for the anger and pain they caused God with their actions.

Gustave Doré, Blasphemers, sodomites, and usurers in the seventh circle. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

Circle 8: Fraudulent - The Circle is called the “Malebolge”, or “Evil Pouches”. There are ten “bolgia”, or “pouches”, that each hold a different sinner and contrapasso.

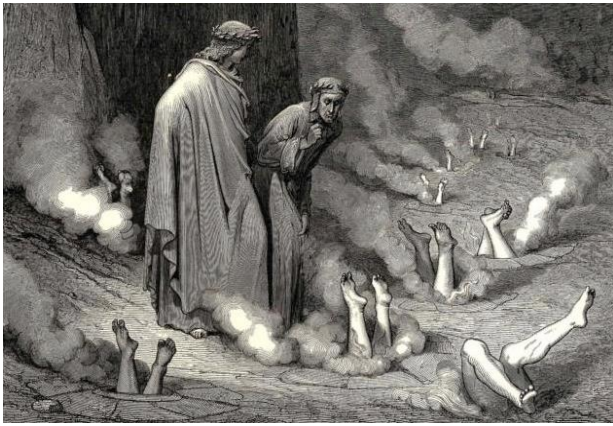
Bolgia 1 (Pimps and Seducers): Pimps and seducers march in opposing lines while being whipped by demons. In life they led others to serve their own interests, so now they are to follow the demon’s interests and be whipped in a line forever.



Sandro Botticelli The Seducers and Adulterers. 1480-1495. Engraving. Top half is the first Bolgia(pouch). Lower half is second Bolgia.

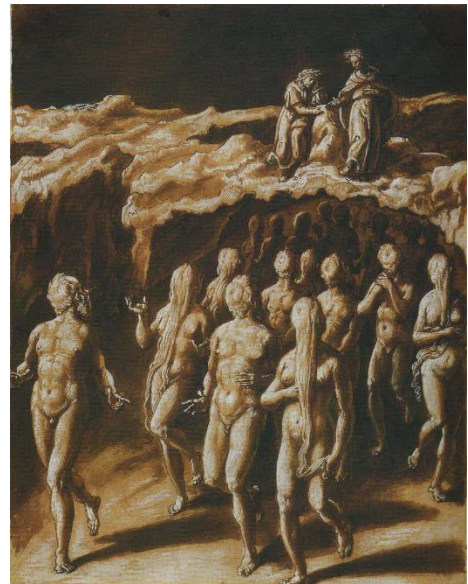
Bolgia 2 (Flatterers): Flattery only gets so far, and in the case of these people, it only gets them a load of excrement. The only things to come out of their mouths in life was ‘excrement’, for a lack of a better word, and in turn now get to exist in a river of it.

Borgia 3 (Simoniacs): Simoniacs are people who abused their powers in the church for wealth, such as selling “pardons” from God. They are buried upside down in holes with their feet sticking up in the air on fire. Baptism normally includes the process of washing your sins with Holy water, so inversely they are now in what can be called an “inverted baptism” where they are being punished, instead of cleansed, of their sin with Hellfire.



Gustave Doré, Dante and Nicholas III. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

Borgia 4 (Sorcerers): All sorcerers have their head twisted backwards; they are in so much pain that they are crying to the point that they are unable to see. They ironically tried to see ahead themselves, via divination or other methods, so they are now stuck seeing only behind.



Stradano, Illustration of Dante's Inferno: Canto 20. 1587. Copper Engraving

Borgia 5 (Barrators): Barrators are corrupt politicians who are now in a giant river of boiling tar meant to represent the sticky and unseeable aspects of their dealings in life.



Stradano, Illustration of Dante's Inferno: Canto 23. 1587. Copper Engraving

Borgia 7 (Thieves): Thieves are attacked by snakes, lizards, and more to the point of not being recognizable. After they reach this point, they are reborn like phoenixes and start the process all over again and again. Seeing as they stole others' possessions, they now get to have their identity repeatedly stolen from them.



Gustave Doré, Alichino attacking Ciampolo. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

Borgia 6 (Hypocrites): Hypocrites are found dressed in gilded lead cloaks. The cloaks make them seem like holy people, but in truth weigh them down like the deceit and lies they told in life should have.



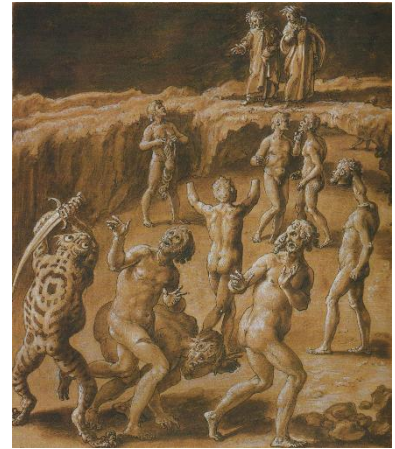
Gustave Doré, Alichino attacking Ciampolo. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré



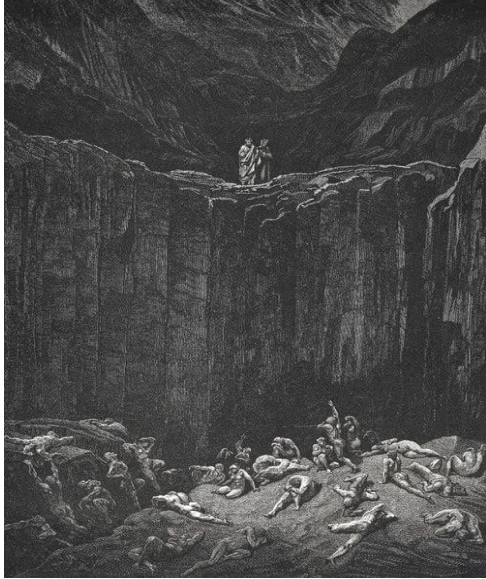
William Blake, *Ulysses and Diomed
swathed in the same Flame/*. 1824-27.
Ink and watercolor

Borgia 8 (Counselors of Fraud): Counselors of fraud are not people who gave fraudulent advice, but instead used their status to advise others to commit fraud. Those found here are in giant individual flames of hellfire that represent their deceitful and destructive personalities.

Borgia 9 (Counselors of Violence): The ninth Borgia is made of individuals who tried to sow discord and split up the beauty and union that God created. They are hacked by a demon with a sword, and then forced to walk their mutilated bodies around as their wounds heal only to be chopped up once again. In life, these souls sought to split God's creation, so they now get to be split physically as punishment.



*Stradano, Illustration of Dante's
Inferno: Canto 23. 1587. Copper
Engraving*



Gustave Doré, Alichino attacking Ciampolo. 1890. Wood Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

Bolgia 10 (Falsifiers): In the final Bolgia there are all those that lied to people as their way of life: Alchemists, counterfeiters, impersonators, and more. They are afflicted with various diseases and ailments of the mind and body, stench, thirst, filth, darkness. Overall, these conditions reflect their value in life as nothing more than a plague on mankind.

Circle 9: Traitors - The ninth and final circle of Hell is home to the worst of the worst, those who betrayed the ones close to them. The ninth circle itself is a large frozen lake, Cocytus, split into 4 concentric rings/rounds that each hold a different form of traitor.

Round 1 Caina (Kindred): In the outermost ring are those who betrayed their own family—these people are frozen up to their necks. They are able to move their heads and try to tilt their face away from the freezing wind. Aptly this round is named Caina after Cain from the bible who betrayed and murdered his brother Abel and committed the first act of murder.

Round 2 Antenora (Country): In the next round we find those that betrayed their political entities such as cities and countries. They also are frozen up to their necks but unable to move their heads away from the constant chilling wind. Once again, this round is named after someone from history, Antenor, a Trojan counselor who opened the gates to the enemy on the condition of being spared.

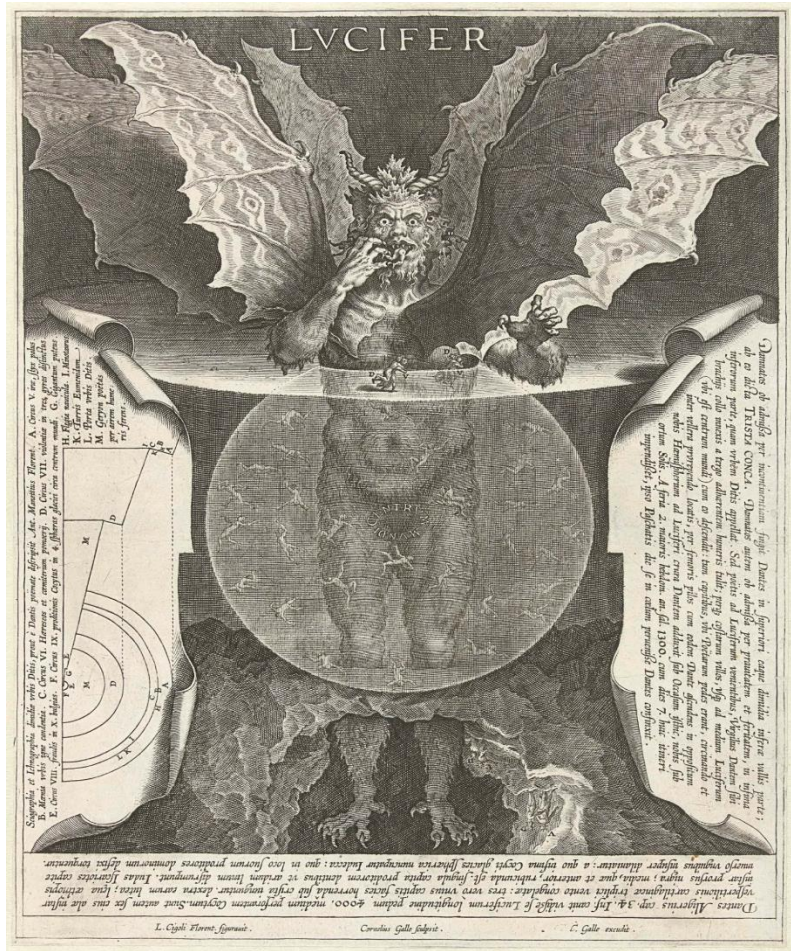
Round 3 Ptolomea (Guests): In the third round we find people who betrayed their guests. Those here are frozen everywhere but half their face. As they cry, the tears freeze into a visor of ice that won't allow them to see or even the comfort to cry. The third round is named after Ptolemy, an old-testament official who invited his father-in-law and his sons to a banquet and killed them.

Round 4 Judecca (Lords and benefactors): This final round is named after Judas the Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus with a kiss and led to his crucifixion. The souls here betrayed those who they called master and served. They are damned into contorted painful poses in full blocks of ice that don't allow them to do anything but exist in pain.

Centre of Hell (God): The center of Cocytus, the frozen lake encapsulating the ninth circle, is reserved for those who committed what I, and many would agree, is the worst sin of all: treachery against God. Here is where we also encounter one of the most notable figures in existence, Lucifer the Devil. He is a giant three-headed six-winged beast frozen waist down in the center of the lake. His left head is a black color, the middle a blood red, and the right a pale yellow. Each of these faces weeps as it eats one of three prominent traitors. Marcus Junius Brutus is in the left head and Gaius Cassius Longinus is in the right. They are the two famous conspirators that led to the assassination of Julius Caesar. In Dante's eyes, having been of Roman descent, he saw their betrayal of the Holy Roman Empire as an act of ruining the paradise God intended for them to have at the will of Caesar. As for the middle head, it is none other than Judas himself, the man who betrayed the Son of God, being eaten and clawed at by Lucifer. The three of them are left to eternally be eaten by Lucifer, but regenerate faster than he

can chew. Dante here I feel also uses this as an opportunity to mock the trinity and at the same time make a mockery of Lucifer as the opposite of what he wanted to be, God.

Lucifer in Dante's *Inferno* is also one of the least imposing depictions of the ruler of Hell. In *Inferno*, Lucifer is set to suffer his own contrapasso after having been the most beautiful and adored angel of all. He was made into not the ruler of Hell, but instead its first punished soul. Now he is a vile creature unable to be anything else than evil, ignorant, and trapped by God as a reminder of his transgressions against God.



Cornelis Galle I, Lucifer. 1591-1612. Engraving. Dante's Inferno: Illustrated by Gustave Doré

This takes us to the end of the *Inferno* and leads to a mind-bending escape from Hell. According to classical thought, Hell was believed to be below us, with Purgatory on the opposite side of the Earth. As Dante and Virgil conclude their journey through Hell, they must descend down Lucifer himself. However, once they reach the midpoint of their descent, they pass the center of the universe and the direction of gravity inverts. They are now forced to climb up Lucifer instead, into a long tunnel that eventually leads them to a starry night sky and Mt. Purgatory.

Purgatorio is the second book of *The Divine Comedy* and covers a similar journey, but instead up a mountain that is made up of rings. Each ring contains souls learning to repent for aspects of a sinful life that led these folks to not reach Heaven (*Paradiso*, the third book the series). A further exploration of these two books and the organization of the afterlife Dante created is something I have not done here but could be done as well in the future. They both hold just as fascinating intricacies that someone could analyze and learn how masterfully crafted *The Divine Comedy* is.

Why Dante matters

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is widely considered a literary masterpiece, and its depictions in art are mesmerizing and captivating. One of the most notable examples is Project Gutenberg's version of Dante's *Inferno*, translated by Rev. Cary and illustrated by Gustave Doré. Doré's illustrations, which depict scenes from the entire *Divine Comedy*, are widely used today to help readers understand the material. The community-driven effort of Project Gutenberg to digitize classic pieces of literature for free has made this incredible work accessible to a wider audience.



William Adolphe Bouguereau, *Dante and Virgil in Hell*. 1850. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris

The use of art to depict Dante's *Inferno* goes beyond just providing visual aids for the reader. William A. Bouguereau's painting is a perfect example of this. Bouguereau's academic painting skills are on full display in this piece, which has become a popular representation of Dante's *Inferno*. The painting's composition, with its grotesquely muscular figures arranged in a non-human spiral, draws the viewer in and focuses their attention on the scene of Gianni Schicchi biting Cappocchio.

Through this scene, Bouguereau illustrates the idea of contrapasso that Dante crafted so carefully in his literature, highlighting the depravity of punishment in Hell for those who live a life against God's Love.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* has had a significant impact on art, literature, and culture in general for the last 700 years. It was a major steppingstone in the Italian language and created a newly found basis of understanding the afterlife like no other before it. Its detailed depiction of the afterlife has inspired countless artists, writers, and thinkers throughout the centuries, and its influence can be seen in everything from high art to popular media. Whether it's a drawing, video game, oil painting, or another form of expression, Dante and his *Divine Comedy* have permeated into everyday parts of our lives. *The Divine Comedy* is a testament to the power of storytelling and to the enduring legacy of one of the world's greatest literary masterpieces.

My personal hope would be that you would take the time someday to sit with *The Divine Comedy* and try to read at least *Inferno*. It is masterfully crafted and worth the read. Whether it brings you to question the afterlife, learn something new about some historical figures, or merely provides the joy of a good read, I hope it opens your eyes to see its influence everywhere you look.

La Divina Commedia notable inspirations:

Below is a brief list of artists' various works that were inspired in some part by Dante's *Divine Comedy*. There are countless one-off references of Dante in many media forms, but those are not all here. The following list is not a full comprehensive list of all inspirations to Dante but just a few notable works that may be more recognizable from various genres of art. I encourage you, however, to further explore on your own how many places you see that Dante's work has inspired and still inspires today.

(Supporting images can be found below the whole section, i.e. (A))

Classical Artworks:

- ❖ *The Comedy Illuminating Florence*, Domenico di Michelino, 1465 (A)
- ❖ *The Barque of Dante/Dante and Virgil in Hell*, Eugene Delacroix, 1822 (B)
- ❖ *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, William Adolphe Bouguereau, 1850 (C)
- ❖ *Beata Beatrix*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1864-70 (D)
- ❖ *The Gates of Hell*, Auguste Rodin, 1880-1917 (E)
- ❖ *Il sogno (The Dream)(Paolo and Francesca)*, Umberto Boccioni, 1909 (F)

La Divina Commedia Illustrations:

- ❖ *Stradano*, 1587-88 (G)
- ❖ *William Blake*, 1825 (H)
- ❖ *Gustave Dore*, 1861-68 (I)
- ❖ *Salvador Dali*, 1951 (J)

Music/Music Videos:

- ❖ "Dante's Prayer", *The Book of Secrets*, 1997 - Loreena McKennitt
- ❖ "Pyramid Song", *Amnesiac*, 2001 - Radiohead
- ❖ "Circle VII: Sins of the Lion", *A Place Where The Sun Is Silent*, 2011 - Alesana

- ❖ “Go”, Single, 2014 - Grimes
- ❖ “Send Them Off!”, *Wild World*, 2016 - Bastille
- ❖ “Heaven”, *Tim*, 2014(recorded), 2019(posthumously released) - Avicii
- ❖ “Eat Your Young”, *Eat Your Young*, 2023 - Hozier

Games:

- ❖ “Devil May Cry”, 2001-2019 - Capcom
 - Popular action-adventure video game about a demon hunter, “Dante”, fighting demon’s attempts at invading Earth.
 - “Devil May Cry”
 - “Devil May Cry 2”
 - “Devil May Cry 3: Dante’s Awakening”
 - “Devil May Cry (mobile game)”
 - “Devil May Cry 4”
 - “Devil May Cry HD Collection”
 - “DmC: Devil May Cry”
 - “Devil May Cry 5”
- ❖ “Dante’s Inferno”, 2003 - Twilight Creations, Inc.
 - 3-6 player strategy board game that advances through the nine circles of Hell to win.
- ❖ “Dante’s Inferno”, 2010 - Visceral Games
 - Action-adventure hack and slash about Dante trying to save his love Beatrice from the clutches of Lucifer in Hell. Heavy inspiration from *The Divine Comedy*, but the plot of the video game is not canon to the source material.
- ❖ “Darksiders”, 2010-2019 - Virgil Games / Gunfire / Airship Syndicate
 - Action-adventure hack and slash following different horsemen of the apocalypse in the perilous aftermath of war between Heaven and Hell.
 - “Darksiders”
 - “Darksiders II”
 - “Darksiders III”
 - “Darksiders Genesis”
- ❖ “Hell’s Rising: Dante’s Adventure”, 2018 - Blazing Dices
 - 4-person board game about collecting souls inspired from *The Divine Comedy*
- ❖ “La porta dell’inferno” (The Gates of Hell), 2020 - Collegio San Carlo / Beyond the Gate
 - VR Concept of Canto I in *Inferno*

Films/Tv Shows

- ❖ “As Above So Below”, 2014 - John Dowdle, Legendary Pictures
 - Horror found-footage film about friends getting lost in the Paris Catacombs, with loose references and inspiration from *The Divine Comedy*.
- ❖ “Inferno”, 2016 - Ron Howard, Columbia Pictures
 - Third and final movie of the *Robert Langdon* film series, “The Da Vinci Code” (2006), “Angels and Demons” (2009), and “Inferno”(2016). Mystery thriller with many references to *Inferno*, a puzzle of *The Map of Hell* by Sandro Botticelli, and more.
- ❖ “The House that Jack Built”, 2018 - Lars von Trier, TrustNordisk
 - Psychological horror slasher movie about Jack, a serial killer, and his journey with a hallucination of Virgil contemplating his past life and murders.
- ❖ “Over the Garden Wall”, 2014 - Patrick McHale, Cartoon Network Studios
 - Animated 10-episode miniseries following two half-brothers, Wirt and Greg, traveling to find their way home in an episodic manner that closely relates to Dante and Virgil’s travels through each circle of Hell.

Supporting Images:



(A)



(B)



(C)



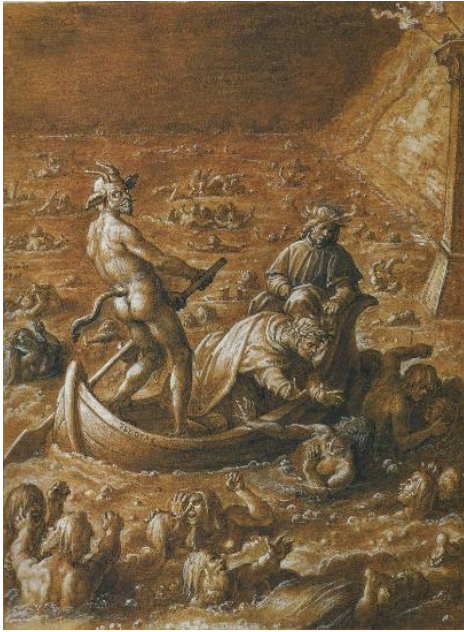
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(E)



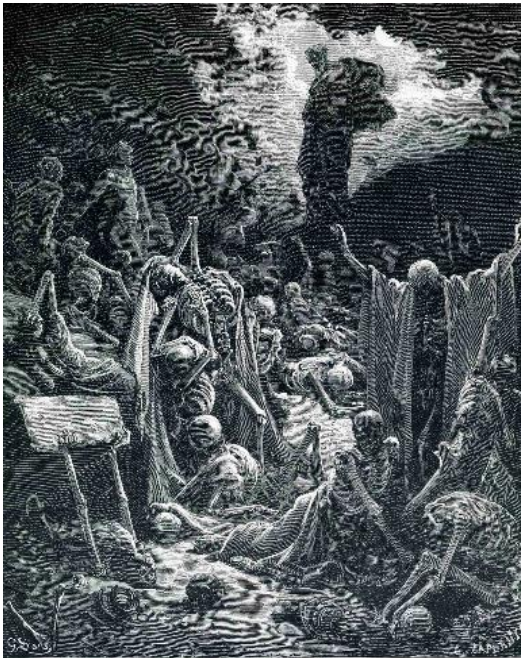
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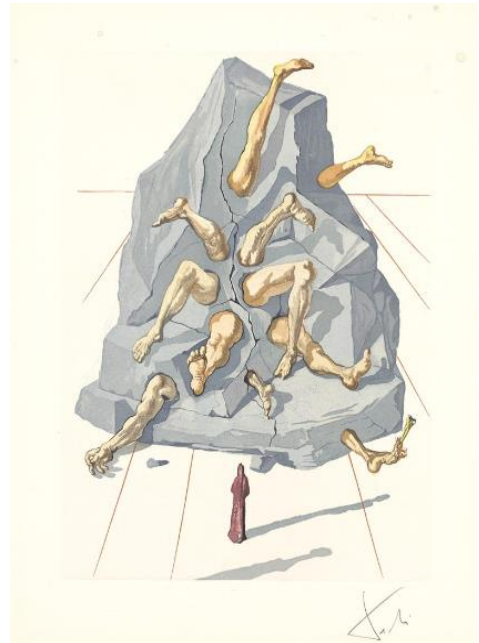
(G)



(H)



(I)



(J)

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- Celano, Peter. *Faces from Dante's Inferno: Who They Are, What They Say, and What It All Means*. Paraclete Press, 2013.
- Dante, Allen Mandelbaum, et al. *Inferno*. Bantam Books, 1982.
- Dante, Robert M. Durling, et al. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. Vol. 1: Inferno*. 1. issued as paperback, vol. 1, Oxford Univ. Press, 1997.
- Noteworthy:
 - Both translations of *Inferno* were used as source material for descriptions of *Inferno* in this paper.
 - *Inferno* by Durling or Mandelbaum, include both translations from Italian and line by line notes on all the references and ideas introduced in the passage by Dante, as well as further context to Dante and all the surrounding components of *The Divine Comedy*. This format, where the author includes various notes on the text is commonplace in most modern copies of *The Divine Comedy* you will encounter today and provides valuable accurate information on many relating subjects.
 - I have taken a full semester discussion-based course at Wellesley College where we covered the full *Divine Comedy* with a deep analysis of line-by-line interpretations and references Dante made throughout his work. This course was taught by Assistant Professor Laura Ingallinella, who has a focus on the intersection of identity politics and literary expression in late medieval and Renaissance Italy.