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Dante & Medieval Florence

By: Dominic Rago



Enrico Pazzi

Flaming Desire

In Purgatorio XXVI, Dante finds himself at the seventh and final terrace of Purgatorio which is the place that contains the lustful. In this terrace, Dante faces the flames of love where many sinners are consumed in the flames. At the beginning, as Dante is walking and curious about the flames, Virgil warns him to look away. Although with the sun setting, Dante's shadow is cast upon the flames which causes some of the souls among the flames to call out to Dante, curious about the man in human form. Not leaving the flames, these souls call out to Dante, but instead of answering, Dante is fixated on people moving in opposite directions, briefly kissing each other as they pass like ants greeting each other. As the groups move past one another, Dante hears one group shouting "Sodom and Gomorrah" and the other saying "That the bull may hurry toward her list, Pasiphaw hides in the cow." Dante then describes the souls departing from one another like migrating cranes, one south one north. After Dante notices this, he turns back to the first group of souls and describes them almost like their faces are glowing with how curious and anxious they were to speak to Dante. Dante tells them that he is still a mortal in his body and asks them about the groups of people he noticed. One soul answers him and tells him that the people walking opposite them shout "Sodom and Gomorrah" because their sexual acts were with the same sex, and that they shout of the Queen of Crete due to their beastly desires of the opposite sex. After this, the soul explaining this information to Dante introduces himself as Guido Guinizzelli, and Dante goes on to tell him that he is one of his poetic "fathers". Guido is in awe of Dante as Dante is in awe of him, and Guido asks Dante to pray to God for him and in heaven for his speedy ascent. Suddenly, Guido dives back into the fire like a fish. Dante then moves toward another soul named Arnaut, another love poet, who unlike

Guido, shares only a couple lines with Dante. He prays for Dante and talks about his past with joy and mentions his goal to end up in heaven. He tells Dante to remember him then retreats back in the flames when the Canto ends.



Nattini Purgatorio XXVI

In this Canto, there are many important symbols and actions that have deeper meaning. One of the standouts is the burning flames that engulf the souls in this terrace. Being that all of the souls are sitting in the fire and must stay in the fire even when talking to Dante symbolizes their transformation of lust to the right form of love. Many times in the Bible, like the burning bush for example, fire and flames are a sign of divinity. These souls must tolerate the burning desire in order to gain new sight and channel that energy ultimately into unconditional love for God. After Dante notices the flames he notices the two groups of people stopping and kissing one another as well as chanting "Sodom and Gomorrah" as well as mentioning the Queen of Crete. Although it seems like kissing

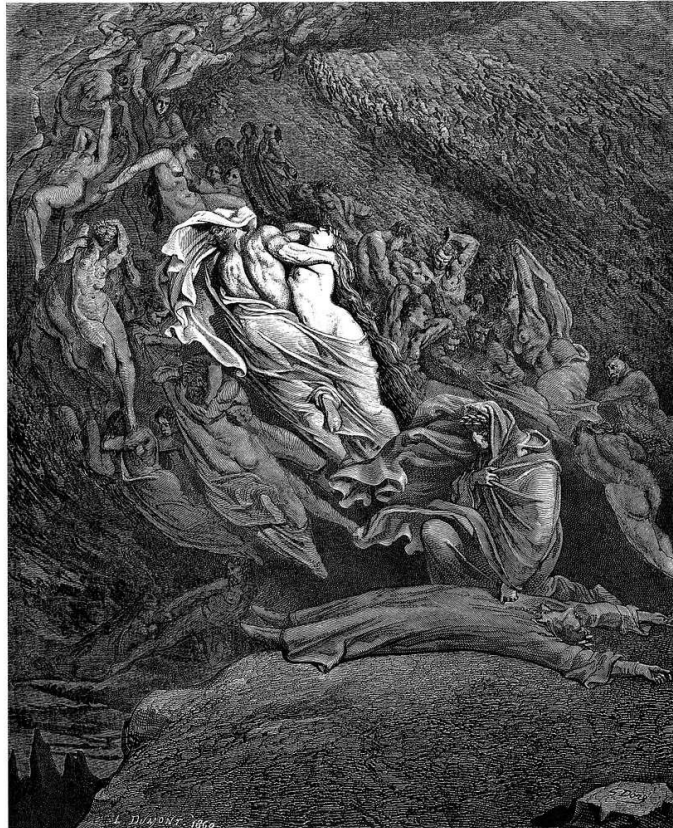
random people in greeting seems a bit unusual, this could be a start of a transformation for these sinners. It could symbolize the souls' have moved on from desire to possess, to instead a new or more advanced desire to wish the other person well. Being in a line and greeting each other like this also shows an aspect of orderliness in love through these people which is exactly what these souls are trying to transform within themselves. The "Sodom and Gomorrah" chant could symbolize this group preferred the same sex with their acts of lust or also an abuse of God's mercy and help. The mention of the Queen of Crete could symbolize acts of bestiality or other foul uses of lust. One of the most important symbols are the souls leaving like migrating cranes in an orderly fashion. If we go back and remember how the souls were being punished in Canto V, the souls were swirling around constantly in a storm with zero order and almost a complete chaos for an eternity. This symbol of cranes flying in order represents the action of taming their desire for the souls, because in the inferno, the idea of lust is that it is just a constant disorderly chaos, but now these souls in purgatorio have transformed that into order. One of the last most important things that happens in this Canto is when Dante meets one of his poetic fathers, Guido Guinizelli. At this moment, Dante can really relate to these souls because Guido is a fellow love poet. In one moment, the pilgrim stares at his eyes and the poet describes him as speechless for a moment. This could tie back to Beatrice and how Dante's love for her that awoke as a love poet could have potential for greater inspiration for Dante. Seeing someone similar to himself, Dante realized that and could be picturing himself sitting in those flames in order to transform his love into the perfect love that God desires.

Ted Talk: Inferno V

Throughout Dante's *Inferno*, we walk along with Dante on his spiritual journey through life. Along the way, Dante learns many things about the nature of sin and the consequences it has on us not just as humans, but in the afterlife as well. As we go along with Dante on this journey, we must keep in mind the events that are happening at the level of the plot for the pilgrim, as well as how these events that are unfolding are painted by the poet. One of the most interesting and significant Cantos from *Inferno* in my opinion is Inferno V, the circle of Lust.

At the beginning of this Canto, Dante and Virgil enter and see the monster judge, Minos. Minos stands in front of all of the sinners waiting to enter hell, as he has the job of assigning each person their place in hell. After passing this monster, Dante now sees the punishment for the souls of the second circle for the lustful: an eternal swirling storm. Now before moving past this as it does not seem like much, this punishment actually tells us readers a lot about the sin of lust. When we think about lust, you must realize how powerful this desire is, and we can see the result of the extremes of this desire through a modern day example like Jeffrey Epstein. Jeffrey Epstein was a very successful man in life and it seems like with all of that power, he could have made the world a better place if he used his resources in a responsible and selfless way. The problem was, Epstein became consumed by the powerful desire of lust which led to him abusing young children and using them for sex. With a normal and clear head, I think all of us can agree that this is one of the most disgusting and evil things a human can possibly do in this world and even Epstein probably thought that at some point in his life ... I hope so at least. But the point is not that, the point of this modern day example was to show how lust can completely consume

someone's soul and be such a fiery and swirling desire in someone's head. It causes a never ending chaos within our soul if we do not attempt to control it. This is the same feeling that is portrayed by the eternal swirling storm in hell. These souls ended up here in hell after letting their lust consume their lives, now they must pay the price and be consumed eternally by a storm.



Gustave Doré

Later on in this Canto Dante runs into a soul swirling around in the storm named Francesca who once lived in Florence. Francesca begins to tell her story by telling us about her love life. She was once married to an old man and long story short, she lost total interest in this guy. She ends up falling in love with her husband's younger brother who is this guy named Paolo. One night the two are sitting and reading a tale from King Arthur about Lancelot and his love with a girl named Guinevere. As they read the story, the two

felt tension from how the story was almost describing their own secret love for one another. As you can guess, the two start kissing, but something takes a horrible turn for the worse: Francesca's husband quickly realizes what is going on and stabs the two with one single thrust of the sword. This is what led them to the eternal swirling storm in the second ring in hell, but as a reader, one must think, did they really deserve this cruel punishment? If you think about it in your own shoes, these people were simply damned by love that ended up happening at the wrong place at the wrong time. Although this may seem like an unfair and cruel punishment, one must understand that Francesca found her only love and happiness in Paolo at the time. This love blinded her from seeing where true love and happiness comes from God in heaven.

Now after a total summary and analysis of Inferno V, we start to see a bit of the reasoning behind Dante's decision to place these certain people in the circle of lust in hell. Although we might be leaning towards Dante's side now, there is something I believe is missing from this story that might turn us a little bit more toward Francesca and the weeping pilgrim. At this time in history and especially in politics with powerful families, most of the time young women were unable to choose their spouse. This could be an arranged marriage, or many men were just able to get their choice of who they wanted in marriage and that was gonna be how it was. Now you can probably see where I am going with this. Imagine today, your father walks up to you and tells you he has someone for you to marry and you have no choice but to listen. Now, you may get lucky and it will be the love of your life, but most likely not, and you may or may not lose interest in this person in a couple years or even right off the bat. Although Dante is fair to say that someone like Francesca should have channeled more of that love for God, it seems as though Dante is pretty critical in this scenario of how a woman should act. You can argue that Paolo and

Francesca should have just kept reading that book and realized this love would lead to their fate, but that is not the point. The point is during this time in history, most of the time men were making choices for women which is unfair. Based on these points, I am not trying to disprove Dante at all because it really can go both ways, but I am just trying to share a little bit of background context that might get you thinking about it in a different way.

Today we see much of the opposite going on after looking at Dante's reality. In the U.S. today, women are heavily involved in politics and can hold just as much power or even more power than men. This is something positive that has changed today that has changed from the time of Dante that probably helps men and women actually find true love instead of lust. Unfortunately, another thing which we see that has changed a lot in our society today is the presence of sex. Whether it be on social media, movies, or simple advertisements, sex has squeezed its way into so many things in our society today that we do not realize. When we are constantly exposed to this "love gone wrong", it can often distract us from true love and also from God. This valuable lesson of "love gone wrong" from Dante is still so relevant today and should be an example for us that can help us live better lives and not get sucked into the so many distractions around us today. Hopefully we learned our lesson and know that we should probably finish our book. By that I mean before we act on impulse, we might want to pay attention to what happens to these characters at the end of the story as a result of their quick judgement, it might just save your life...

Character Profile:

Name: Beatrice Portinari

Nickname: Dante's Angel



Elisabeth Sonrel

Famous quote:

“Strive, if you can, to open your heart only to women or to a courteous man, who will send you promptly on your path. You will find love with her; commend me to him as is your duty” (Alighieri/Appelbaum 39-41).

Known for:

Beatrice Portinari is known for being the main influence of Dante's work called *La Vita Nuova*. She also appears as a guide for Dante in his work *La Divina Commedia*. She is especially known for her beauty and angelic characteristics.

Previous appearances:

In Dante's *La Vita Nuova*, he talks about his feelings toward Beatrice and he also talks about her in poetic form. Dante said that the purpose of this poem was to communicate perhaps the feelings of what it was like to be in her presence. In *La Divina Commedia*, Dante shows his spiritual love for Beatrice and eventually in Purgatorio she turns into Dante's guide leading into Paradiso. Eventually in Paradiso, Beatrice becomes the center of a very important procession with many other biblical and mythical characters. At the end of Dante's encounter with her, Beatrice tells Dante that she is angry with him for sinning after she dies. Lastly, Beatrice shows Dante a vision portraying the Church and its corruption and how one day there will be a leader that will save the Church from its corruption. Dante's job is to take these words back to earth and spread it to everyone.

Beatrice is also portrayed in many works of art in the 19th century. In these works, based on Dante's descriptions, Beatrice is portrayed as immortal and angelic.



Carl Wilhelm Friedrich

The appearances and descriptions of Beatrice in all of these works portray the meaning of courtly love. Courtly love is described as passionate yet disciplined and it relates to a human feeling of erotic desire connected with a person's spirituality. In Dante's case, this is best described as Dante's goal of channeling his love for Beatrice towards God.

Representation in Dante's works:

In *La Vita Nuova*, Dante describes Beatrice as a noble lady whom everyone liked. He talks about how people would walk up to her in the street just to look at her. Dante talks about how people would describe her as an angel sent from heaven. Even with all of these people praising her, she was always humble and never showed a false sense of pride. In *La Divina Commedia*, Beatrice symbolizes the relationship between the love for God and the human soul. Like described in *La Vita Nuova*, Beatrice is the lady that is pretty much unattainable by any man due to her perfection, which is why she is glorified and is an important symbol of love and God in *La Divina Commedia*. This representation is similar to Dante's description of her on Earth and when he met her as a young child when she is described as graceful and an angel from heaven.

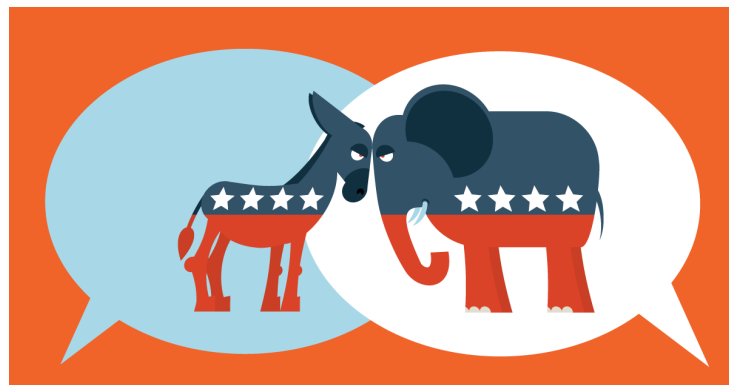
Trivia:

Beatrice Portinari passed away at the age of 24 without knowing any of the effects she had on Dante Alighieri including inspiring his *Divine Comedy*

Conversation with Dante: Talking Politics

Today in the United States and especially most recently, many of us have seen the increase in polarization in regards to our politics. Going back and getting more specific, in 2016, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton went into an all out battle. The conservatives went all in on Trump and claimed that Hillary Clinton was a criminal for a few decisions she made

as the secretary of state under Barack Obama. The liberals hated Donald Trump saying that he was also a criminal for abusing and sexually harrassing women. The point is, politics at this point in American history got more heated than ever before. It seemed as though most people from opposing sides could not even have one respectful conversation with one another without yelling at each other or abruptly and rudely leaving. This has continued over the past few years and flared up again especially in 2020. In the election of 2020 when Donald Trump ended up losing to Joe Biden, conservatives ended up claiming that Joe Biden even rigged the election and they refused to admit that he was their president. In the middle of all of this there has been more political and racial violence than usual because of this tension. With all of these problems and so many different sides and takes, at times it can seem hard to think of the root cause of all of this and why it has gotten so much worse recently in our country. The fact is, it comes down to something a lot simpler than people think: having a healthy conversation.



When we are hanging out with our family or friends, we often like to shy away from politics to avoid damaging these relationships and setting a bad mood. Although this seems like fair reasoning, this is one of the reasons why we have such a toxic political atmosphere today in the United States. Someone who has shared a great example and someone who we can turn to in order to learn more about this problem is Dante Alighieri. Although it

might sound amusing that we could learn more about political talk today from a guy who lived in the thirteenth century, you would be surprised how much insight Dante can give us about these issues.

In *Inferno X*, Dante finds himself in the sixth circle of hell, the circle of heresy. Out of the blue in the canto, a voice reaches out to Dante and it ends up being the voice of a fellow Tuscan named Farinata. Farinata was a political leader of Dante's era, who clearly represented in the Canto, was of the opposing party of Dante. Now keeping in mind that Dante was very much against the opposing party and was later exiled by his opposing party, one would think that these two would get into a heated argument and be very adverse towards each other, but surprisingly we see the opposite. The two go about this conversation politely and Farinata also shares a prophecy to Dante, sharing his knowledge about Dante's future exile from Florence. Along with that, although one would think that Dante would hate a person like Farinata and think what he and his party had done was dishonorable, we find that Dante respects Farinata for his love of Florence. If we think about this in today's environment, this relationship seems unheard of. Dante shows us a perfect example of how to have a healthy political conversation and how much more we can get out of an interaction if we handle it in this way. Hopefully more Americans will study Dante and one day realize the importance of this topic for our future in the United States.

Meme:



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