

University of San Diego

Digital USD

Italian 347: Out of Florence: Dante in Exile

Italian and Italian Studies

Winter 1-21-2022

A Look into Dante's Inferno: Praise through Proactivity

Massimo Re

University of San Diego, mre@sandiego.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital.sandiego.edu/ital-347>



Part of the [Italian Language and Literature Commons](#)

Digital USD Citation

Re, Massimo, "A Look into Dante's Inferno: Praise through Proactivity" (2022). *Italian 347: Out of Florence: Dante in Exile*. 4.

<https://digital.sandiego.edu/ital-347/4>

This Zine is brought to you for free and open access by the Italian and Italian Studies at Digital USD. It has been accepted for inclusion in Italian 347: Out of Florence: Dante in Exile by an authorized administrator of Digital USD. For more information, please contact digital@sandiego.edu.

INFERNO



TED Talk

This talk is all about decision-making, a skill that I, after nineteen years of life, am still working on. I'm not going over the steps to make a decision, but more so the mindsets people often find themselves in when making a difficult choice. Admittedly, I hadn't really recognized the frames of mind either before a couple of weeks ago. But, after reading a few cantos of Dante's *Inferno*, I sort of stumbled upon a personal realization.

Canto III in *Inferno* is relatively uneventful, but massively important to the story Dante tells in his poem, offering insight into the lobby of Hell, but not much more than that. The canto starts with Dante and Virgil stood in front of a door and a sign, which reads:

Through me you go to the grief-wracked city.
Through me to everlasting pain you go.
Through me you go and pass among lost souls.
Justice inspired my exalted Creator.
I am a creature of the Holiest Power,
of Wisdom in the Highest and of Primal Love.
Nothing till I was made was made, only
eternal beings. And I endure eternally.
Surrender as you enter every hope you have
(Alighieri, lines 1-9).



After pondering the sign for a moment, they enter and are immediately met with hellish sounds, big surprise there, consisting of every possible human sound that conveys anguish or torment. Dante, understandably, asks who is making these awful sounds and why they are doing so. Virgil explains that the chorus is made of up of two groups, those who have been forgotten with no "honour" or "ill fame" and angels who pledged loyalty to themselves alone. The reason he gives for their cacophony is the fact that they have lost hope in death, so they must come to the terms that they are eternally stuck in this liminal space. Virgil, however, fails to mention that the souls are constantly being stung by hornets and wasps, which personally, I think plays a large role in the screams of pain coming from the mass of shades.

Regardless of the souls' conditions, however, Dante and Virgil continue along their journey when the ferryman, Charon comes by and tells Dante to leave these shores because he is a living soul. Virgil explains that their mission is willed by God, and Charon no longer pays any mind to Dante. The canto ends with Charon giving the duo a ride across the Acheron and Dante fainting halfway through the trip.



I think the reason I was so drawn to this canto was the fact that Dante examines the three kinds of people found in almost any given choice or event within our lives. You have Dante, the hopeful, someone who has never experienced the horrors of Hell, and thus, has no reason to be afraid. This group is often characterized by children or people just entering adulthood, as they have not experienced the potential downsides to making a certain decision or choosing the wrong option. Then you have Virgil, the courageous, someone who has personally lived through what goes on behind the aforementioned door. This group sort of acts as an opposite to the hopeful group, as they have lived through the negative outcomes of a decision. It is important to mention, however, that the courage is born from the death of hope. Now, this group might not always feel brave or strong when deciding, which is fine, because their courage isn't found within how they might make their decision, but in the fact that they make the choice at all. And finally, you have the chorus of angels and souls, the indecisive, the ambiguous mass of sounds and pain doomed to be eternally stuck in their personal limbo. These people simply don't partake in the decision at all, but instead sit idly by, either worrying or not caring at all, and watch the opportunity slip through their loose fingers. Dante's portrayal of this kind of person hit very close to home as I am notoriously indecisive in just about every decision I attempt to make, ranging from something as serious as my possible career choice to something as trivial and forgettable as where to go to lunch on a given day. Now, it's not like wanting someone else to pick where we eat for a meal is going to condemn me to an eternity of wasps stinging my face, but I believe the message is still there, even if it's present in a much smaller way.

Now that we have the types of people down, let's see what Dante has to say about each of them.

The sign in the very beginning of the canto explains that, behind this door lies eternal pain and grief and that everyone who enters through it must abandon all hope. To not only go through this door, but the journey through Hell as well, is a choice, and the two characters' reactions to the warning are extremely telling of what Dante was trying to say about each type of person. On one hand, we see Dante, a relatively ignorant character to the agonies of Hell, who has trouble even understanding the sign. I believe that this is indicative of the fact that hope cannot be ruined by simply stating the negative outcomes of a decision. Instead, one must actually experience said negative outcomes in order to truly abandon all hope. Virgil, on the other hand, has no hope left and replaced it with bravery when he said, "all taint of cowardice must here be dead." (Alighieri, line 15). This shade, despite knowing what will happen, chooses to curb his fear and enter anyway. Furthermore, given the fact that this is a Christian text, the fact that this journey is willed by God introduces another level of depth. This extra layer characterizes itself as the notion that, "it doesn't matter if you're a bright-eyed person filled with dreams or a person who has lost all optimism in life, God provides strength, so long as you find the bravery to make the decision in the first place. This idea is reinforced by the third party in the sense that they were abandoned by God because they were unable to make the choice to follow him.

Given the text, as well as the depiction of these three groups, Dante is making an important commentary on making decisions in one's own life. We see Dante's idea of "living" is characterized by making choices because it offers some amount of control in one's own existence. This is shown in many different contexts throughout the poem, including but not limited to, the shades', except for Virgil, inability to traverse across the circles at their own discretion, Satan being stuck in ice and constantly making the choice over and over again to flap his wings (at that point, is it even a choice?), and line 64 in Canto III (pertaining to the indecisive group of shades and angels characterized by hate and pain) which states, "these wretched souls were never truly live." In showing a myriad of examples of the entities free will being stripped, Dante explains to us that the ability to make choices is beautiful and refusing to make them because we're afraid with what might come or that we're complacent with our current scenario and letting countless opportunities fly across our eyes is an affront to life itself. To reiterate, especially for potentially life-altering chances, always be willing to make a choice, because even though it might be frightening or difficult, ending up with either the good or bad outcome is better than having no outcome at all.

Now, how will you make your next decision?



VIRGIL

"The Handrail"

Guides Dante along his ups and downs,
but can never truly leave his post

"No man; a man
I was in times long gone."

Regarded as Rome's greatest poet,
Virgil was known for writing works
including "Aeneid", "Eclogues", and
"Georgics"

Allegedly very reserved and shy, he was a
very introspective and philosophy-based
poet



Trivia

- Allegedly sent to Rome to study rhetoric, medicine, philosophy, and astronomy at the age of 5
- He was a wealthy man, with an estate worth 25 times more than a Roman knight's
- Died of heatstroke

THE AENEID OF VIRGIL

VIRGIL



Acting as guide to the author, Dante portrays Virgil almost as a father figure. Dante also places him in a very philosophically interesting place in Hell: Limbo.

Virgil is placed in Limbo and denied entrance into heaven for the sole reason that he was born before Jesus Christ, despite being a good person. These circumstances, that are largely out of Virgil's control, question religious and social philosophy, something Virgil was known for

CANTO VII

Summary:

The canto begins with Dante and Virgil continuing along their arduous journey and encountering a man called Plutus, a figure representing material greed. Plutus seemingly manic and aggressive, is quickly dismissed by Virgil, allowing the duo to pass along. Shortly after this, Dante sees the fourth circle of Hell. Virgil explains that this is circle housing the avaricious and the prodigal, depicted as two factions of people rolling large boulders at one another. We will touch on these two sins in a second, as they are massively important to both the religious and social interpretations one might have when reading this poem. After their initial sight of the fourth circle, Virgil goes on to tell Dante about Fortune and the vicious hold she has on humanity. The duo then goes on to see a small bit of the fifth circle, the plane that houses the wrathful and the sullen.



CANTO VII

Analysis:

This canto is extremely dense, as it describes Plutus, as well as two circles, one of which housing an extremely egregious sin for Christianity and society alike. Let's start at the top with Plutus. Outside of the text, Plutus, the Greek god of abundance and wealth, is often portrayed as youthful and almost always often clutching a cornucopia. This relatively innocent depiction is lost in Dante's work, as Virgil uses terms such as "rabid" to describe him, calls him "an execrable wolf" (Alighieri, line 8) and tells him that he wishes that "fury gnaw [him] inwardly away" (Alighieri, line 9). These harsh words are followed immediately by Plutus falling straight to the ground, all mania in his actions seemingly cured. Through drawing associations between Plutus and his animalistic qualities, Dante strips the character away of his humanity and godliness, essentially boiling him down to the sin he represents: greed. Also, the fact that Virgil wishes for Plutus' own anger to consume him helps Dante create a parallel between wrath and greed that is explored later in this canto.

After their brief encounter with Plutus, Dante and Virgil descend further down until they come across the fourth circle. The fourth circle of Hell holds shades who committed acts of avarice or prodigality in their lives. To put this in simpler terms, these people are being punished for hoarding material goods or for their reckless spending. Interestingly, on paper, hoarding money and spending money seem like they are on opposite ends of a spectrum, and they technically are, but of their punishments seem to connect the two in a rather intimate way, almost like they're two sides of the same coin. For instance, they each have the exact same punishment of pushing a heavy boulder across a field, but Dante adds another layer of complexity through posing them against each other. In other words, the prodigal push from one side, while the avaricious push from the other, often leading to collisions. On top of this, Dante, unable to identify them, makes the comment that they rolled their boulders "thrust by rib and tit" (Alighieri, line 27), which can be read as "they pushed the stones with their hearts", referencing the fact that they put so much of themselves in pursuing money in the living world that their "mindless lives that made them all so foul / darken them now against all acts of mind." (Alighieri, lines 53-54).

CANTO VII

Analysis:

This explanation, given by Virgil, explains that these people sacrificed so much to obtain money and material wealth, that they lost themselves, as well as their identity, in the process. What I find particularly interesting about this punishment is that these collisions would never happen in real life, as these lifestyles are completely opposite of each other. To reiterate, these two sins seem to exist free of each other, as a hoarder is not prodigal and a spender is not avaricious, so the collisions have to symbolize something. The way I see it, they symbolize the involvement of others. For example, avarice and prodigality seem like extremely personal sins, as they only concern oneself and one's belongings. While this makes sense on its own, Dante's theory of sins mentions that no sin is private and it always affects the people around you. In this sense, the collisions can be taken in a few different ways. I believe that Dante concerns the fourth circle of Hell with two major topics: Christianity and society. In a religious aspect, "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (1 Timothy. 6:10). The over importance one might place on money or material goods often pulls them away from their faith in God and leads them to become almost enamored with the idea of physical things. Other than a religious reasoning, I think that viewing this punishment through a social lens also works well. To put this into context, Dante lived in a time of corruption and social unrest, with two parties, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, fighting for political power. So, in taking this into account, I believe that the collisions could also represent the social drawbacks of the mishandling of money or goods. For instance, either hoarding or overspending could be seen as a method to skew the market or a ploy to gain power, ultimately leading to social disruption. Also, it should be noted that Dante combines these two aspects of life in Florence by ruthlessly stating that the sins found in this circle are the commonly found in members in the clergy, helping the audience realize Dante's perception of corruption in relation to the system of Christianity, as opposed to the religion itself.

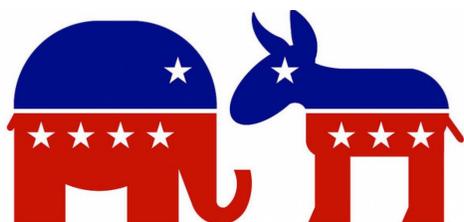
CANTO VII

Analysis:

The next major point found within this canto is Virgil's explanation of Fortune. This conversation starts with Virgil explaining that wealth is small prank that Fortune plays and even if these people had all the gold that has ever existed under the moon, they would still never be happy. Dante, upon hearing this becomes intrigued with this mysterious figure Virgil calls "Fortune". Quickly agitated by his questions, the guide lashes out and essentially states that people are idiotic for chasing and praising the idea of luck and that Fortune exists beyond human comprehension. He explains that she simply moves material wealth around evenly, much like God does with his distribution of light, and that her methods are sneaky and forever veiled from humanity's eyes. Interestingly, Virgil goes on to make the point that her issuing of goods works almost as a scale, in that when one group flourishes, one must suffer. On top of this, he states that the people she benefits often disparage her, further showing humanity's lack of understanding towards Fortune. This conversation, however one-sided, offers valuable insight to the idea of luck in relation to the sin of greed. In our world, being lucky is often in reference to gaining money or material things, so the overindulgence or obsession with the idea, lends itself to the fourth circle. Virgil's explanation and emotions behind this conversation reveal to the audience that the idea that predicting luck is fruitless and she exists just above our reach.

The final major part of this canto is the duo's entrance into the fifth circle, known for holding those guilty of wrath or sullenness, which takes place in a bog with dark water. As for the importance of the landscape, the muddy ground and murky water have symbolic applications with both emotions. For instance, anger and sadness alike are known to grab onto their victims and restrict them from moving on, either in a melancholic or begrudging way, much like mud. As for the dark waters, they can either cloud your vision, much like hatred or anger does, or consume you, like depression. After noticing the landscape, the duo sees a massive group of people fighting naked. It should be noted here that these people "each battered each – and not with fists alone, / also with head butts, kicks, and charging chests.", but much like Plutus in the beginning of this canto, these people are also dehumanized, as they fight with "their teeth, too, tore them, bit by bit, to shreds" (Alighieri, lines 112-114). Through comparing the wrathful and sullen to Plutus, Dante states that the inevitable outcome of insatiable greed is immense sadness or anger.

CONVERSATION WITH DANTE



Guelfo



Ghibellino

Despite being such an aged text, *Inferno* still offers valuable information on many of the pressing matters that remain prevalent in today's society. For instance, I believe that one of the most glaring issues facing America today is political corruption and factionalism found within our government. The two-party system has failed the citizens and benefitted the politicians, leading to corruption on levels that even the law can't handle. *Inferno* offers insight into a couple different facets relating to political corruption, factionalism, and general sinfulness in a political place. For instance, from the author's point of view, Dante was stuck in political turmoil for much of his life, even experiencing something akin to a two-party system not once, but twice. Now, I acknowledge that these were entirely different circumstances, as the Guelphs and Ghibellines actually entered a civil war, but I believe that the essence of the story is still there. These events allow him to write a story that captures small experiences from his actual life, like his meeting with Farinata degli Uberti in *Inferno* X. While this meeting might just seem like one politician meeting another, I believe that Dante intended it in at least one other way. Given the text, Dante is telling his audience, both back in his day and now, that regardless of the political party you affiliate with, we will still be joined in death. Also, due to the fact that they were able to stay polite in front of each other, I believe that both characters, as well as the people that they represent, were able to respect each other because they recognize they share the common goal of improving their city, but just had a slightly different way of carrying it out. Furthermore, being a politician himself in a time of political unrest, Dante has also no doubt either partaken in or seen forms of corruption happen to his very own government body. This, in Dante's book, is an absolute travesty. Greed, as mentioned earlier, is one of the most hated sins in Christianity, as it opens someone up to turning their back on God and turning to physical possessions, leading to them committing other sins, like wrath or sullenness. Similarly to greed, Dante despises a betrayal of trust, such as Cain to Abel or Judas to Jesus. In fact, the sin of betraying one's own family sends you directly to the ninth circle of Hell, and betraying one's nation sends you even further down. In posing such a drastic conclusion to corruption or treachery in the government body, Dante offers Americans a benchmark to hold their politicians to and hopefully work towards as well. This idea facilitates conversation about the status of the American government because it both gives us something to compare them to, as well as allowing us to see which standards we should be holding our fellow people to as well. In short, according to Dante, it is not enough to be able to point and criticize one's own government, but instead, one must be willing to shoot for the stars and improve their nation as if it was their own household.

Works Cited

- Alighieri, Dante, and Robin Kirkpatrick. *The Divine Comedy I, Inferno*. Penguin Books, 2006.
- Elder, Terri, and Alice English. "Virgil: Poet and Son of a Farmer." *Virgil: The Poet - Virtue and Adversity: The Poetry of Virgil in the DA Kidd Collection* - University of Canterbury - New Zealand, 2014, <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/exhibition/virgil/virgil/poet.shtml>.
- Holy Bible: The New King James Version, Containing the Old and New Testaments. T. Nelson, 1982.
- "Virgil." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, 2016, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/virgil>.



Blake, William. *Dante and Virgil at the Gates of Hell*. 1824. William-blake.org, <https://www.william-blake.org/Dante-And-Virgil-At-The-Gates-Of-Hell-Illustration-To-Dantes-Inferno.html>

Botticelli, Sandro. *Portrait of Dante*. 1495. Wikiart.com, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/sandro-botticelli>

[Cover of *The Aeneid of Virgil*]. (n.d.). <https://www.kobo.com/us/en/ebook/the-aeneid-of-virgil-18>

Di Pompeii, Pietro. *Inferno, Canto III*. 2020. Artmajeur.com, <https://www.artmajeur.com/en/pietrodipompeii/artworks/13992548/inferno-canto-iii>

DonkeyHotey. *Republican Elephant & Democratic Donkey – Icons*. 2011. Flickr.com, <https://bit.ly/342laaw>. CC by 2.0

Doré, Gustav. *Canto III – Abandon all hope ye who enter here*. 1857. Wikimedia.org, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gustave_Doré_-_Dante_Alighieri_-_Inferno_-_Plate_8_\(Canto_III_-_Abandon_all_hope_ye_who_enter_here\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gustave_Doré_-_Dante_Alighieri_-_Inferno_-_Plate_8_(Canto_III_-_Abandon_all_hope_ye_who_enter_here).jpg). Public Domain

Doré, Gustav. *Canto III – Lucifer King Of Hell*. 1861-1868. Wikimedia.org, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DVinfernoLuciferKingOfHell_m.jpg. Public Domain

Doré, Gustav. *Plutus*. 1861. Victorianweb.org, <https://victorianweb.org/art/illustration/dore/dante/5.html>

Doré, Gustav. *The Fourth Circle of Hell*. 1857. Reddit.com, https://www.reddit.com/r/museum/comments/iwhgqv/gustave_doré_the_fourth_circle_of_hell/

Flores, Rafael. *Dante and Virgil*. 1855. art.com, <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/dante-and-virgil-rafael-flores.html>

[*Pictures of the Guelph and Ghibelline symbols*]. (n.d.). <http://yourcontactinflorence.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Guelphs-and-Ghibellines.jpg>

[*Side profile of Virgil*]. (19th century). Wikimedia.org, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Virgil_.jpg. Public Domain

Vetri, Paolo. *Dante and Virgil in front of Charon's Boat*. 1874. Google.com, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/dante-and-virgil-in-front-of-charon-s-boat-paolo-vetri/swFz32qn5xp-w>