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Italian 347: Out of Florence: Dante in Exile

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## Derek Johnson Dante's Inferno Mini Magazine

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# ITALIAN 347



# TED TALK

In Canto V from Dante's *Inferno*, Dante uses the figure Minos from Greek mythology as the gatekeeper and protector to the second level of Hell. This is the first time in the comedy that Dante mentions the structured system that indicates the kind of sin that was committed: "And so from Circle I now went down deeper, to Circle Two, which bounds a lesser space and therefore greater suffering" (Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 5, 1-3). One sin characterizes you and the reason you are in Hell. The worst thing you have done without reconciliation and forgiveness from God determines your standing in the afterlife for all of eternity. Within this structure Minos assigns sinners to their damnations in a specific level by wrapping his tail around the sinner a certain number of times, corresponding to the level they will be placed in. When Virgil takes Dante through this level to meet the damned souls, he sees Cleopatra, Helen (whom the Trojan War was fought over), and a woman from Florence named Francesca (Dante's *Inferno*, Canto 5, 100-108). Dante deliberately talks to Francesca above the others because he believes that her story is the most important for the reader to understand. He uses his creative license to make an arguably insignificant historical figure extremely important to the plot to teach the reader and himself a lesson. Francesca gives the reader their first female perspective as the sinner which begs the question of the gender roles in the sins of lust. Dante chooses not to talk with her lover Paolo or Paolo's brother who killed him but Francesca specifically in this scene. She says she is unhappy even though she is able to be with the one she loves for all eternity which is insightful to the sin of lust itself. Lust is the sins of the flesh but can really apply to all sins. When someone makes their reason bow to their instinct they commit the sin of lust but it is ultimately straying from God's love and acting against it. Throughout this canto, Dante makes a couple plays on words with "legge" and "amore" in Italian one meaning either law or reading and the other meaning love. Dante uses "legge" to add interpretation into the text and have the reader second guessing what they just read. It is a powerful literary device because the reader has to read in between the lines and infer a lot about the passage instead of just taking information directly from the poem. Dante also uses the word "amore" meaning love almost ironically to talk about Francesca and Paolo because it is not true love but superficial instead. Diving deeper into the meaning of specific words in both the original Italian and English translation give insight into the type of lessons Dante was trying to give to us as well as make connections to what is happening in the modern world where his thoughts can be put into practice.

# Character Analysis

## Charon

“Guardian of the Gate”

Erebus — Nyx  
|  
Charon



Drachma

“Degenerates! Your fate is sealed! Cry  
woe! Don’t hope you’ll ever see the  
skies again!”

Canto 3, 83-85

# Politica

In this Canto Dante meets people who were false with their religious choices against the church. Specifically, they believed that one's earthly body did not have a soul that went along with it. Because of this sin, they are cast as shadows in a grave sight with no apparent body but only a soul. As Dante and Virgil walk through the graveyard, a shadow rises from a grave and recognizes Dante's accent. Dante is apprehensive but Virgil convinces him to engage with the shade and talk to it. Dante immediately recognizes the voice as his political rival Farinata who was a part of the opposite faction known as the Epicureans (Dante's *Inferno*, Canto X, 13-15). The Epicureans were heretics who followed the teachings of the philosopher Epicurus. Most of which involved science and focusing on the practical parts of life by not worrying about what happens after (Britannica). After this realization, Dante and Farinata have a civil yet argumentative conversation about Florence, very similar to a modern-day political debate. Another shadow recognizes Dante's voice and questions him about why his son is not with him. This conversation was very strange and Dante was very taken aback. He responded like his son had passed but he had no idea why he did that. The shadow goes back into the grave not knowing the true story and Dante regrets that he was unclear to the spirit.

This was the first Canto where Dante encounters sins entailing the use/abuse of intellect rather than just merely sins of the flesh. Because of this use of intellect to stray away from God, Dante paints a very ironic image of these sinners as the things they claim not to believe in. Because these heretics do not believe in the soul accompanying the body, they are portrayed in Hell as souls set apart from bodies located in a graveyard. Dante recognizes these sinners very personally because he knew them in life but also because of the sins they committed. False beliefs go against everything Dante stood for so these acts meant a lot for him. Although this is only the 6th ring of Hell, Dante had a very high disregard for this level and the acts they committed.



# Conversazione

In today's America the two party system rules the nation similarly to Dante's era: modern day republicans and democrats then Plebeians and Magnates (Museo). Much like in Dante's time when you were exiled for your particular belief, currently in different areas across the country, people are outcasted for their differing opinions and "values." In my discussion today with Dante, we conversed about how the lines between values and political ideology are constantly being blurred by society and those who are in positions of power. In Florence at the time, power, money, and betrayal plagued the city that Dante had once loved. He mentioned that after the wars between them and other cities, people began to change. The city that he was exiled from was no longer the Florence that he loved. Throughout the comedy, Dante juxtaposes the old utopian-like city that he once loved to the city that gave up on him and his beliefs. In the Inferno, Dante encounters people who have committed many of these sins as well as others. In each ring, Dante said that he made sure to be extremely specific with the sins each person committed but vague in some cases as to why they are there. For example with Francesca, the woman in Inferno V, Dante speaks with her about her "amore." He uses this play on words with "love" in the original Italian because he does not mean true love like Francesca describes it to him. Sins are subjective and although the impact of a sin can be similar to others, most of the time the intent is what matters. Dante said that people who commit adultery and other sins of the flesh can also be in Heaven. What really matters to God is not the act itself, but the purity of the soul. Although Dante is a devout Catholic he toys with the ideas of faith and changes some of the aspects of Hell. As each level goes deeper into the Inferno, the sins become worse along with Dante's opinions on the sins committed in each ring. You can tell the value he puts into each different sin because of the tiers and people who occupy them. In the lowest ring, for the sin of treachery, are people like Cassius and Brutus as well as Judas. All of these people were unfaithful to the people who depended on them the most just like Florence was to Dante. They turned their backs on someone and committed unforgivable sins in God's eyes but more importantly Dante's. Dante explained the pain Florence caused him because of the amount of love he once had for the city. His family and the woman he loved all came from Florence and never being able to return hurt him to his core. If places could be in Hell then Dante would have surely placed Florence in its fiery depths along with everyone who committed treachery against him. Dante attributes this pain equally to how Julius Caesar felt when Brutus and Cassius stabbed him in the back.

# Citations

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