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### The Mythological Allusions in Dante Alighierie's Inferno

**Abstract:** This study identified all allusions from classical mythology found in the first book of the Divine Comedy, the Inferno. It looked into the appropriacy of the use of each mythological allusion in hell, and how each mythological allusion hammered home the impact of the punishment.

This qualitative research used textual analysis to crystallize the mythological references in the Inferno. Each allusion was interpreted based on its story. Knowing what they are in mythology served as a springboard for the analysis of their place in the Inferno, thus a close reading of the allegorical epic was done. Alluded to were Hector and Achilles, Trojan war heroes and protagonists in Iliad; Helen and Dido, famous women; beasts and monsters like the Minotaur, Cerberus, and Harpies; and places such as the rivers Styx, Phlegethon, Acheron, and Cocytus.

Based on the analysis, it was found out that the Inferno is rich in mythological allusions. Imaged and symbols are found in almost every canto of the poem. The great images however are Virgil, the representation of Human Wisdom and Beatrice, the image of Divine Wisdom and she also symbolizes the "Blessed Virgin".

The use of each mythological allusion in hell was found to be appropriate. The placement of these mythological allusions in hell was based on their stories and sins. It was also gleaned

that each reference either to sinners, or places or monsters and beasts hammered home the impact of the punishment. Dante has placed each mythological allusion in the circles of hell corresponding to what they were or did in classical mythology.

Keywords: allegory, allusion, Divine Comedy, epic, mythology

## I. Introduction

“Dante had been in hell,” said Velasco in the introduction of her thesis “Historical Characters in Dante’s Inferno”. With this statement, the reader might wonder what he was doing in hell and why a mortal man was able to go to hell. Dante’s Divine Comedy will answer the queries of the readers. This masterpiece tackles his journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise. If Dante was able to surpass the turmoils in hell, it was because of his pure and great love for Beatrice which he immortalized as his guide in overcoming the hazardous journey.

Tan writes that a great number of college students consider literature a bore and though they read all the assignments given to them and participate in class discussions, they do not profit from these for they do not realize the meaning and value of literature to their lives (Tan, 1995). This statement gave the researcher an insight to work on what is considered as the world’s greatest masterpiece – the Divine Comedy.

Based on the researcher’s experience in secondary and collegiate literature classes both as a student and as a teacher, it has been observed that the teaching of literature was more on the surface content of the text alone. Some teachers apparently do not fully expound or determine the train of thought, the deeper meaning, message or idea that the text conveys to the students. Literature is treated by most students as just one requirement they have to hurdle in order to graduate.

In this study, the researcher hopes to inspire the teachers and students to study literature, find enjoyment and appreciate the values and lessons in literary pieces, especially Dante's Inferno. Furthermore, Dante will cease to be a strange figure in the literature classrooms.

## II. Statement Of The Problem

The first canticle of the poem Divine Comedy which is the Inferno is the focus of this research. It aimed to analyze and interpret the text to crystallize the mythological allusions found in the canticle. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What mythological allusions are found in the first book of the Divine Comedy?
2. How appropriate is the use of each mythological allusion in hell?
3. How does the use of the mythological allusions hammer home the impact of the punishment?

## III. Methodology

This is a qualitative research using textual analysis focusing on the mythological allusions found in Dante's Inferno.

The analysis of this study follows this pattern:

1. Read the entire poem (Inferno).
2. List down all mythological allusions found in all circles of hell. The researcher has used books in mythology in order to find out why a particular character in mythology is present in hell. Knowing what they are in mythology served as a springboard or basis for analyzing their place in the Inferno. A full understanding of these characters in mythology is therefore needed.

3. Each mythological allusions are analyzed for the appropriacy of its role. The stories of these mythological allusions are noted and analyzed.
4. Make a conclusion.

#### IV. Discussion

The Divine Comedy is consist of one hundred cantos. Each book consists of 33 cantos. The Inferno has 33 cantos plus one in the introduction. Dante's Inferno is formed of nine-concentric ever-narrowing circles. Dante draws his structure from Aristotle treats sins resulting from incontinence fairly mildly.

First Circle – Limbo is the place of the unbaptized and virtuous pagans. It is inhabited by those who were worthy of being in paradise but lived before Christianity or without baptism. This includes children who died before they were baptized. Their not having this first sacrament makes their punishment spiritual. They have a strong desire to see God, but being unbaptized, this desire will never be satisfied. Dante gave them a painless and honorable fate for they were put in a contemplative and calm place. Virgil, Homer, and Aristotle were placed by Dante in this circle.

Second Circle – Lustful. The souls here are forever buffeted by violent storms. The sin is closely linked with love according to Dante and that is why he considered it as relatively mild. In the circle, the black wind symbolizes a howling darkness of helpless discomfort. As the lovers drifted into self-indulgence and were carried away by their passions, so they drifted forever. In the lustful are seen Minos as a judge, Dido and Paris, and Achilles.

Third Circle – Gluttons. The souls are flailed by cold and filthy rain and tormented by Cerberus, the dreadful three-headed dragon-tailed dog that allows all spirits to enter, but none to return.

Fourth Circle – Avaricious and Prodigal. In this circle, the avaricious and the prodigals move in opposite directions, endlessly pushing around great weights. Pluto is a pagan figure strongly connected with avarice. In mythology, he is the king of the underworld.

Fifth Circle – Wrathful and Sullen. The wrathful are besmirched by the muddy Styx, the former are immersed in it, gurgling their lament which surfaces as bubbles. Phlegyas, the Furies, Persephone, Medusa, and Erichtho were placed by Dante in this circle.

Sixth Circle- Heretics. Entombed in hot sepulchers, the heretics suffered great torments. Heresy according to Dante means an obduracy of the mind, a spiritual state which defied consciously. In this circle, Dante saw a field of graves, burning tombs were spread all around and inside them, souls suffered great torments. No mythological character was present in this circle.

Seventh Circle – Violent Against Neighbors, Violent Against Themselves, Violent Against God, Sodomites. The tyrants and murderers are immersed in the river of boiling blood. The suicides are transformed into strange trees and the squanderers are hounded by bitches, the most striking scene in hell. The blasphemers are lying supine on fiery sand. The sodomites or people engaged in homosexual activity are punished by endlessly crossing the fiery sand beneath the rain of fire. Minotaurs, Centaurs, Phlegethon, Chiron, Pholus, and Nessus are the mythological characters in this circle.

Eight Circle – Panders, Seducers, Flatterers, Diviners, Astrologers and Magicians, Hypocrites, Thieves, Evil Counselors, Sowers of Scandal, Alchemists, Impersonators. The seducers are scourged by demons as they unsuccessfully tried to escape the whips. The diviners, astrologers, and magicians walk forward with their heads backwards. The hypocrites were dressed in magnificent gilded robes, but the robes were made out of heavy lead and so the spirits wept as they trudged around. The thieves are reduced to ashes and then being restored to their former shape only to be stung, reduced to ashes and restored again. The evil counselors

are being clothed in flames that burn them. The sowers of discord are perpetually circling and wounded. When wounds heal, they were wounded again by a demon with a sword. The alchemists are plagued by scabs, lying on earth, scratching furiously. The impersonators are punished by being deprived of their sanity. Jason is found in the circle of the flatterers.

Ninth Circle – Traitors to Kin, Traitors to Guests, Traitors to Country, Traitors to Lord and Benefactors. The traitors to kin are immersed in ice, heads bent down, eyes and lips are frozen. Traitors to guests are immersed in ice, their eyes are sealed with frozen tears. Traitors to country are plunged in the frozen lake, gripped by ice. Traitors to benefactors are completely immersed in ice. In here, Lucifer lies completely covered by ice. According to Dante, Lucifer is placed at the bottom of hell, being the root of all evils on earth. The giants Ephialtes, Briareus, Antaeus, Typhon and Titus are the mythological characters present in this circle.

#### V. Conclusions And Implications

Mythological allusions like beasts, monsters, people and places abound in the poem. All in all, Dante alluded to trojan war heroes like Hector and Aeneas, the bravest among the Trojan warriors, were placed by Dante in the first circle where the virtuous pagans dwell: Achilles and Paris, who committed the sin of lust were seen in the second circle, blown forever by stormy winds: famous women like Helen and Dido who were also placed in the circle of the lustful: places like the rivers Styx, Lethe, Phlegethon, Acheron, and Cocytus: beasts and monsters like Harpies, Cerberus, and Mimotaurs to mention some. It implies that Dante is a wide reader. His knowledge in mythology is so broad that he was able to describe in detail the placement of each character in his Inferno. The Divine Comedy is really a creation of a genius like Durante Alighirie. Dante's Inferno, being replete with references in mythology.

The placement of each mythological allusion is appropriate in hell. The sinners in all circles of hell portray the kind of life they had while still alive. The stories of these

mythological allusions are apt to their placement in hell. Their placement in hell is based on their stories and sins, therefore there is appropriacy in using these figures from mythology.

It implies that sin is present here on earth. That earth is like hell where sins and sinners reside. A person's deeds and actions while still alive will be atoned after death. It is one's sin that will determine and bring him/her to his circle. Dante's creativity was shown in his placement of these mythological allusions in hell.

Does the use of these mythological allusion hammer home the impact of the punishment? Yes. It is because the punishment of the sinners is commensurate to the sin. The sinners are placed by Dante in each circle based on the seriousness of the sin. The impact of the punishment is appropriate to the sin itself. It implies that Dante's towering genius is encompassing. It is to Dante's credit that the Inferno is written.

## VI. Recommendation

1. A close reading of the text should be done when the Divine Comedy is taken up as a subject matter in order for the students to appreciate the figures of speech used and other literary devices.

2. A similar study be conducted dwelling on the other two books of the Divine Comedy – the Purgatorio and the Paradiso.

3. The researcher has suggested a technique in teaching Dante's Inferno which would help students appreciate more literary pieces and values in life as well, based on their experiences. It is called the "schematic technique". Schema which means experience. The students will be asked to share their experiences in life. After the sharing, the teacher will employ the 'test of goodness-of-fit'. Based on their experience, they will identify which circle of hell they might go to if they die with unforgiven sin. After this activity, the teacher will now introduce the content of the poem, examine each line and identify the images and

symbols found in the poem. This is a very enjoyable technique and at the same time students will learn values based on the experiences that they have shared. The success of this technique will depend on the motivation of the teacher in encouraging the students to share their life experiences.

#### Aknowledgment

If Dante was able to surpass all the turmoils of his journey through hell and purgatory, it was because of the only woman he loved, Beatrice. This researcher too thanks her love ones, her family, for believing in her, for challenging and inspiring her in her scholastic journey, from the Inferno to her Paradiso.

To God Almighty, for the gift of life and wisdom, this piece of work is heartily dedicated.

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