

The Death of Pity: An Examination of the Poetic and Theological
Roles of Pity in Dante's *Inferno*

Dante's *Inferno* is a masterpiece of theology and poetry, overflowing with rich insights into several timeless themes and questions. As with any allegorical text, one must begin with the literal interpretation, but it would be a great loss to end there. The *Inferno*'s narrative is admirably complex, and so, to examine the deeper meaning of this poem, a great deal of care is required. This paper will begin by considering how Dante conceives of pity. From there, it will explore the role of pity in Dante the Pilgrim's spiritual pilgrimage and investigate its theological and poetic significance. More specifically, it will examine the interplay between divine justice and pity in judging the apparent innocence of sinners, as well as the role of poetry in experientially teaching the reader about morality by inspiring pity and forcing him or her to grapple with it. By examining the theme of pity, this essay works towards the conclusion that as much as one may be pulled to feel pity for the sinners in *Inferno*, doing so is not only unjust, but it also blinds us to the true nature of sin.

According to Dante the Poet, pity is feeling for another in their suffering, and the intensity of the pity is proportionate to how much the pitier recognizes themselves in the pitied. Further, pity moves one to hope for relief of the pitied's pain because, most importantly, one believes the pitied is innocent and does not deserve their fate. For example, in Canto V, Dante the Pilgrim meets Francesca and Paolo, the adulterous lovers fused together as punishment for their lust. Having already seen several sinners in this circle, the Pilgrim tells the reader, "Pity confused my senses, and I was dazed."¹ Then, Francesca, with her sweet but deceptive words, intentionally crafts the retelling of her transgression to elicit even more pity from the Pilgrim. Repeating the structure of the preceding line with amplified feeling, the Poet writes, "pity /

¹ Dante, *Inferno*, 111.

blurred my senses; I swooned as though to die, / and fell to Hell's floor as a body, dead, falls.”²

Tricked into seeing Francesca as innocent, the Pilgrim is overcome with pity by the injustice of her punishment. It is as though he identifies with them to such an extent that he participates in their suffering with his “painful tears of pity.”³

While the contemporary use of the word “pity” carries with it the connotation that the pitier is somehow above the object of their pity, this sense of prideful distance and moral superiority is not present here. Insofar as the Pilgrim’s pity is sinful, it is not because his pity is prideful in this way. On the contrary, the Pilgrim is so emotionally close to the sinner’s suffering that he not only feels the pain as if it were his own, but his uncontrolled receptivity also heightens the feeling into an ostensibly lethal passion. As will be further discussed, the Pilgrim’s overwhelming emotion is indicative of his moral failings, as he has yet to learn that the mercy of divine justice can only forgive where there is true repentance. In this sense, pridefulness is seen in the pitied, but it is the pitier who facilitates it by identifying with the pitied. This allows the pitied to assert his or her false innocence and victimhood, thereby denying responsibility for their actions, as if, in their pride, the pitied sees themselves as above the consequences of their own actions.

Although the Pilgrim is currently at the beginning of his development, one may argue that his naivety is insufficient to explain his extreme pity towards the sinners' punishment. A possible explanation for the emotional severity of his reaction is that the Pilgrim is shocked that literature, and, by extension, poetry, could lead someone into sin. While his pity increases with every line in the Canto, he only collapses when Francesca reveals that romance literature, specifically the tale of Guinevere and Lancelot’s infidelity, caused their adultery, for their

² Dante, *Inferno*, 113.

³ Dante, *Inferno*, 113.

“Galehot was that book and he who wrote it. / That day we read no further.”⁴ Ironically, the famous adulterers of Arthurian romance are not meant to be seen as an exemplar—the discovery of their affair leads to a brutal civil war that eventually leads to the end of Arthur’s kingdom. In other words, Francesca fails as a reader when she misinterprets the half-read legend as emboldening the lovers’ passion instead of warning against it. Also notable is how in her retelling of the legend, and through it the retelling of her own story, she has reversed the role of the lovers.⁵ In the Arthurian romance, it is Guinevere who takes the initiative; however, Francesca tells of Lancelot kissing Guinevere just as Paolo is presented as kissing her. Some may question whether Francesca *intentionally* switches the characters to make herself even more piteous. However, the salient point is that if the story of Lancelot and Guinevere can be misunderstood to such an extent, perhaps the same charge could be leveled to *The Divine Comedy* and he who wrote it. Dante the Poet may be alerting the reader that they should not see the Pilgrim’s inordinate pity as an example. Later we get more obvious hints as Virgil berates Dante for his pity. Interestingly, we do not get this kind of hint here. Perhaps Francesca’s failure as a reader is what signals the Pilgrim’s affective failure as he, shocked by the ruin that romance literature, and perhaps even his own poetry, can inflict on others, sees how poetry’s power to inspire intense emotion in the reader can be dangerous if not read with care.

However, readers should note that Francesca’s beguiling ‘tragedy,’ in which she and her lover are entirely innocent and blame a book for their involuntary fall into sin, is intentionally crafted to fool Dante the Pilgrim. She begins her ode by flattering him: “O living creature, gracious and so kind . . . you who show pity for our atrocious plight.”⁶ She clearly recognizes the

⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, 113.

⁵ Dante, *Inferno*, 118.

⁶ Dante, *Inferno*, 112.

Pilgrim's sympathetic temperament and crafts the telling of her story in such a way that cannot fail to obtain his pity, even going so far to use the Pilgrim's own poetic style against him. For example, her repetition of the word "love" to begin each of three consecutive tercets is telling of her deceit.⁷ As Mark Musa, the translator of the text, notes, "Francesca deliberately employs the style of *stilnovisti* poets . . . in order to ensure the Pilgrim's sympathy, but follows each of those lines with sensual and most un-*stilnovistic* ideas," including the idea of love as an external force of pure lust and sensuality that violently and inescapably "seizes" someone.⁸ It should then come as no surprise to the reader that nowhere in Francesca's rationale does she take responsibility for her freely-willed actions, even though she and all the sinners in Hell are free to do so at any time.

Interestingly, and perhaps unexpectedly, the text does not depict the sinners overwhelmed with guilt and remorse for their actions, repenting for a fate they cannot change. Most, if not all, of them deny any responsibility in their own actions, instead portraying themselves as innocent and their sin as something external and completely out of their control. However, as will be further elucidated, that the sinners are innocent is not the lesson that the Pilgrim or the reader is meant to learn from the text. Still, it is difficult to grapple with the idea that Francesca and her lover are physically trapped in Hell for eternity because of their one-time adulterous passion—is this punishment, a result of God's retributive justice, not overly harsh? One should not ignore his or her intuitions but examine them, for perhaps they point to something significant.

It is common to interpret the *Inferno* as suggesting that Hell is a physical place and divine justice is simply retributive. But the text also suggests a non-literal view of Hell in which the sinners' *contrapassi* are meant to symbolize a psychological and spiritual condition that is self-

⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, 118.

⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, 119, 112.

inflicted through their pride.⁹ Admittedly, this is a substantial claim. To justify it, one must begin with the literal interpretation of the text before examining its allegorical significance. For an action to be willfully self-inflicted, it must first be established that choice between actions is possible. Thus, for the sinners' *contrapassi*, a punishment in which the essence of a sin is acted out either by analogy or its opposite, to be self-inflicted, they must have the option to either refrain from punishing themselves or leave Hell altogether—both, it seems, are possible.¹⁰

For example, in the final canto, Satan is found to be the one responsible for Hell's frigidness by beating his wings: "He flapped them constantly, / keeping three winds continuously in motion / to keep Cocytus eternally in ice."¹¹ In other words, not only does he trap the other sinners in this circle, but he also immobilizes himself in a frozen prison of his own making. Notably, there does not seem to be any reason why he does not stop flapping his wings and free himself. He is the sole source of his own continued imprisonment.

Similarly, Hell itself is far from an inescapable prison. Regarding the very entrance that he and the Pilgrim entered to journey through Hell, opened by Christ during the Harrowing of Hell, Virgil speaks of this "less secret gate, / which is, and forever will be, unlocked."¹² In other words, the gates of Hell are completely open.¹³ Nothing and no one, not even God, is forcefully keeping the sinners in Hell against their will. Rather, the sinners keep themselves there because of their pride and refusal to accept responsibility for their actions.

In this way, the sinners' punishments are entirely self-inflicted. On this reading, the sinners are not punished as a result of simple retributive justice. Instead, divine justice allows the

⁹ Blackell, "Love in Dante's Divine Comedy."

¹⁰ Blackell, "Love in Dante's Divine Comedy."

¹¹ Dante, *Inferno*, 381.

¹² Dante, *Inferno*, 142.

¹³ Caruana, "Dante's Franciscan Spirituality - A Reading of Hell."

freedom of the will to choose what it wishes, even if it chooses evil, and grants the consequences that follow from the choice. The sinners choose their sin and embrace unrepentance again and again and again, and with it they will their own eternal damnation. For these reasons, the sinners deserve their punishment and do not deserve pity, a difficult lesson that the Pilgrim and the reader must learn.

Theologically, Dante the Pilgrim must learn not to pity the sinners because their punishments have been ordained by divine justice, and to pity the sinners is to go against divine justice. The Pilgrim's education in this matter is not linear, and he frequently relapses into pity despite Virgil's admonishments. For example, at the sight of the soothsayers, whose heads have been completely twisted backwards, and tears flow down to their buttocks, the Pilgrim is overcome with pity. Weak and weeping, he asks, "how could I keep my eyes dry when, close by, / I saw the image of *our human form* so twisted."¹⁴ Rather than despair at the soothsayers' bodies in particular, the source of his pity is in seeing the human form shared by both Dante the Pilgrim and the Poet, the reader, and the sinners. In them, the Pilgrim recognizes not only himself but humanity as well. Interestingly, this moment of pity where recognition is highlighted causes Virgil's harshest rebuke: "In this place piety lives when pity is dead, for who could be more wicked than that man who tries to bend divine will to his own!"¹⁵ While Virgil may simply be referring specifically to the soothsayers, who attempted to subjugate divine will to their own by divining the future and presumably trying to change it, this seems like a narrow reading. It is more compelling to read his admonishment with a wider scope: not only is the sinners' suffering just, to pity the sinners is a sin itself.

¹⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, 252 (emphasis added).

¹⁵ Dante, *Inferno*, 252

To understand this crucial lesson in Dante the Pilgrim's spiritual development, which seems so cruel on the surface, one must examine the role of divine justice as it relates to the theme of pity in *Inferno*. Building upon the points previously discussed, there are three major reasons why pitying the sinners is unjust.

First, if one sees their punishments as self-inflicted, to deny them their punishments would be to deny the dignity in the freedom of the will. Free will carries with it significant responsibilities, but if there are no consequences to our actions, then how could they have any meaning? It is unjust that one wills an action of their own volition and not take responsibility for it. Further, because the sinners freely choose never to repent—a choice that cannot be denied, even for their own good—they must be allowed to suffer the consequences.

Second, to see the sinners as innocent is to let pity blind us to injustice. Although the worst sinners are locked in the deepest depths of Hell, farthest from God's love, injustice is present in every circle to a greater or lesser extent. In extracting the Pilgrim's pity, they take advantage of his naivety to validate their self-victimization and pander to their egos. Rather than look out for the Pilgrim's best interests by warning him of their mistakes, most promote their innocence. How self-serving this is, for while the Pilgrim's pity cannot help them, it brings him great danger in that it tempts him to follow them into sin and immobilize him in Hell.

Finally, pitying the sinners is prideful, since they are judged by divine justice to be guilty of their sins, and pity indicates that the pitier thinks they are innocent—one does not feel pity for those who are rightly punished. In some sense, to do so is to place one's human judgement of innocence above that of divine justice's condemnation. In sum, the punishments of divine justice may seem harsh and unwarranted, until one realizes that it is a moral failing to show pity to someone who, through their failure of responsibility, does not deserve it.

It may be necessary at this point to head off what seems to be a prevalent argument, which is that some of the sinners are innocent by virtue of ignorance and, thus, deserve our pity. This argument seems to maintain that the sinners are either unaware of what they did wrong or that they were unaware that what they did was wrong. Either way, they cannot be held accountable for their actions. (To be clear, this is a different argument than the concern that a certain sin, suicide is the one most often referred to, is not immoral to begin with. There are legitimate objections that can be raised on this matter, but it is not the purpose of this essay to delve into them.) It seems difficult to believe that the sinners are unaware of the action that damned them to the Inferno—they seem to know exactly what to discuss when asked by Dante the Pilgrim and Virgil. As for their being unaware that their actions were wrong, that also seems like a poor defence since many of them show “shame,” attempt to hide their past, and fly into a rage when the Pilgrim tells them that they are “rightly punished.”¹⁶ Why do this if they do not recognize the evil of what they have done? Perhaps a better question would be, “Why are modern readers so unwilling to blame the sinners for their actions?” One should wonder what one’s reactions say about oneself.

Perhaps there is another way that pride is connected to pity. Pity can blind one’s own eyes to the reality of one’s own condition. For if pity is fundamentally identificatory, what, exactly is one identifying with? If one is identifying with the sin, then pity may blind him or her to their own sins. Similar to how the sinners refuse responsibility for their wrongdoings though their self-pity, in granting innocence to the sinner who one identifies with because he or she shares the same moral failing, one may be unjustly pardoning oneself of that sin. In this admittedly convoluted fashion, the pity that one feels for another may still be focused on the self.

¹⁶ Dante, *Inferno*, 292, 244.

Whether the Pilgrim feels this particular type of pity towards all the sinners he pities is still a question, but in fleshing out the relationship between the omnipresent pride present in Hell and pity, it is an interesting avenue of thought.

If one is searching to justify the emotion felt for the sinners, and this is certainly something the poem forces readers to grapple with, there are better lines of argument than rendering them innocent. For example, there are times when Dante the Poet notes that “even now,” that is, presumably, after he has completed his spiritual pilgrimage to Paradise and returned to Earth, he still grieves for some of the sinners.¹⁷ One example is when he encounters the sinners who deserve his respect. In fact, Virgil goes so far as to suggest that Dante the Pilgrim “run toward *them*, for it would be more fitting.”¹⁸ Yet, despite their admirable qualities, these men are still damned. Here, one sees an example of the complexity the Poet gives his characters. They are not mere stock characters used to illustrate some cartoonish version of Hell and then be forgotten as soon as a token moral lesson is revealed at the end. The Pilgrim’s admiration is so great that he would have thrown himself down into the fire with them, but he decides to keep his passion in check.¹⁹ He responds to the sinner’s inquiry not with “repulsion, no, but *grief*,” for their terrible condition.²⁰ One should note that he does not use the word pity, thus it seems as though one may distinguish between the two reactions. Perhaps one may still grieve for a person’s circumstances while recognizing their incorrect decision. In other words, the granting of innocence, rightly or wrongly, would seem to be a prerequisite for pity but not for grief. It seems as though, in the overwhelming misery of their punishments, one might overlook other, more appropriate reactions to the sinners. For one may grieve for the misfortune of

¹⁷ Dante, *Inferno*, 214.

¹⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, 215.

¹⁹ Dante, *Inferno*, 216.

²⁰ Dante, *Inferno*, 216 (emphasis added).

someone's circumstances or the loss of their noble qualities while still condemning their decisions. Nevertheless, it is still unjust to pity someone who brings their fate upon themselves without accepting responsibility for the consequences.

Although this is a crucial lesson in Dante the Pilgrim's journey, it is certainly a shocking conclusion—especially when the poem intentionally pulls at the reader's tender heartstrings. However, the poem does not condemn all pity. In fact, without pity, the Pilgrim would have been left alone, cornered by the three beasts of sin. It is only because of Beatrice's pity, who is moved through the grace of Saint Lucia and the Virgin Mary, that the Pilgrim escapes the dark wood. One might ask, "What makes the pity felt by Beatrice for the Pilgrim appropriate, but not the Pilgrim's pity for the sinners?" Perhaps the most significant difference is that Beatrice gives her pity to the Pilgrim out of love while the sinners wrench it out of him for themselves. His pity is a passionate emotion and is without reason. As Beatrice inspires Virgil to guide the Pilgrim on his journey with her tears and sweet speech, she says, "love moved me, as it moves now to speak."²¹ Her pure love, which is passion in line with reason, opens the way for the Pilgrim to be saved—an opportunity he is worthy of because he recognizes he has gone astray. The Pilgrim, in his plea for Virgil to take pity on his soul and his acceptance of help, recognizes that he does not live within a self-enclosed world that revolves around him—he is dependent on the help of others and divine grace.²² Here, the bonds of love are not rejected, and this is what allows the Pilgrim to confront his own sinfulness and eventually be reunited with God. To reiterate, Beatrice's pity is an expression of divine grace while the Pilgrim's pity is rooted in a pride of refusal of responsibility or self-scrutiny.

²¹ Dante, *Inferno*, 81.

²² Dante, *Inferno*, 69-71.

Still, it is a good question to consider why a poem that seems against pity would try to bring about the very thing it seems to condemn so harshly. And so, there is one final thing to be said about the pity and poetry in the *Inferno*. In his role as an everyman character, one learns about the nature of sin alongside Dante the Pilgrim, eventually learning that sin is love misdirected or given in the wrong degree. Through poetry, one sees the true nature of sin viscerally, humorously, and at times, heartbreakingly rendered in the sinners' contrapasso. Consider Bertran de Born's gruesome decapitation: for misusing his reason to sever the bonds of community—familial and political—he severs the seat of reason from his body.²³ Or Pope Nicholas III, who waits upside down in a font with the soles of his feet on fire as in a parody of baptismal rites.²⁴ This is the ridicule-inspiring consequence of perverting the institution of the church and taking advantage of the community's moral and spiritual guidance for selfish monetary gain. Or Pier Delle Vigne who, for breaking the bond between oneself and all others, including God, is condemned his own hand to spend eternity in isolation, trapped in the egoism of the will present at the last moment of his life, and only finding a bitter outlet for communication through the injury inflicted by another.²⁵ Perhaps even Virgil, although not condemned to Hell proper, is similar to the various sinners in that his account of limbo is also defensive and self-pitying. In every contrapasso, the condition of the sinner's soul in life is reflected back upon them in death. The depiction of these devastating punishments is heightened by the medium of poetry, even if Dante the Poet comes up against the limits of language at times. It is a vehicle for truth in a way that is unmistakably different and, arguably, more effective than a theological treatise. Thus, in

²³ Dante, *Inferno*, 329.

²⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, 243-44.

²⁵ Dante, *Inferno*, 187-89.

grappling with the feelings of pity inspired by the text, the reader comes to understand that sin is the perversion of love in a way that poetry is particularly apt at communicating.

In conclusion, the theme of pity plays a complex role in Dante the Pilgrim's journey. Theologically, pity plays a crucial role in his development as he learns to align his passions with reason. Eventually, he comes to realize that, despite many of the sinner's attempts to convince him of their innocence, their punishments are self-willed and are thus just. To feel pity for those who shirk responsibility for their actions is both to sin against divine justice and to invalidate the gift of free will used to make those decisions. As for poetry, it has the ability to describe the nature of sin in a way that stirs emotion in the reader, making its subject better understood than more direct forms of communication. By making the reader feel for the sinners, Dante the Poet's poetry allows the reader to participate in Dante the Pilgrim's spiritual development, so long as the reader is careful not to fall into pity's trap. This is a temptation one must recognize and avoid. Overall, the theological and poetic roles of pity come together to teach the reader that sin is love that is misdirected, excessive, or deficient. By walking alongside the Pilgrim as he completes his journey, one finds that pity and poetry can lift us to the highest point of Heaven, but only if one is not enamored by it in the lowest circles of Hell.²⁶

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²⁶ I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Mark Blackell of Vancouver Island University and Dr. John Caruana of Toronto Metropolitan University for their thought-provoking lectures and seminars on *The Divine Comedy*, which have been invaluable in creating this paper. In particular, I would like to thank them for their insightful reading of the text which emphasizes the central role of love, as well as the fascinating reading that one can read the sinner's punishments as self-inflicted.

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