

Dante: The Inferno, Notes & Literary Terms

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Allegory

- “In literature, symbolic story that serves as a disguised representation for meanings other than those indicated on the surface. The characters in an allegory often have no individual personality, but are embodiments of moral qualities and other abstractions. The allegory is closely related to the **parable**, **fable**, and **metaphor**, differing from them largely in intricacy and length. A great variety of literary forms have been used for allegories. The medieval morality play *Everyman*, personifying such abstractions as Fellowship and Good Deeds, recounts the death journey of Everyman. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, a prose narrative, is an allegory of man's spiritual salvation. Spenser's poem *The Faerie Queene*, besides being a chivalric romance, is a commentary on morals and manners in 16th-century England as well as a national epic.” [The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, 6th edition]
- On a literal level, the Divine Comedy is the story of one person journeying through hell, purgatory, and heaven. Symbolically, the work represents the struggle of every human to acknowledge and overcome sin, recognize God, and achieve spiritual transcendence.
- The power of allegory is that, while the story relies on specific events and people of the time of Dante, it retains its power and significance in an allegorical sense.

Terza Rima

- Dante's work is written in **terza rima**, a poetic rhyme scheme which involve interlocking rhymes written in iambic **tercets**. (three line grouping). There are no specific requirements for meter in terza rima.
- Dante is credited with inventing the structure, perhaps to symbolize the Trinity, and to provide a sense of unity to his work.
- Terza rima is much more natural in Italian than English, but Robert Frost wrote a famous poem using the technique, “Acquainted with the Night”
 - I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain--and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

Motif

- A **motif** is a theme, character type, image, metaphor, or other verbal element that recurs throughout a single work of literature or occurs in a number of different works over a period of time.
 - **Political figures.** Dante uses political figures of his time repeatedly to illustrate sins and corruption of his time.
 - **Mythological Connection.** Dante relies heavily on the traditions of Greek and Roman mythology. Dante uses these figures to enhance his connection to classic poetry that he admires, like the works of Homer and Virgil.

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Themes of Dante's Divine Comedy

- The Divine Comedy as a whole functions as an allegory about the quest for salvation. Dante assumes the role of any person pursuing the light of God.
 - Structurally, the poem is deeply symbolic
 - After the initial canto, the three major sections of the work (The Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso) are divided into 33 cantos, representing the age of Christ when he died.
 - The work also represents **The Trinity**
 - The Inferno represents the power of God the Father
 - Purgatorio represents the wisdom of Christ the Son
 - Paradiso represents the love of the Holy Spirit

Themes of The Inferno

- **Contrapasso**
 - The belief that punishment should be retribution and reciprocation for what crimes a person commits, both on the physical body and on the social person
 - Derived from the passage in Exodus (But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.)
 - St. Thomas Aquinas, probably the most direct influence on Dante, wrote, “[Contrapassum is] an exact concordance of a reaction with the antecedent action,” and the nature of justice requires that the punishment be harsher and deeper than the crime.
 - As a result, the working emphasizes **fitting** and **commensurate** punishment for the sins of the damned in hell. Gluttons wallow in mud, the violent are attacked, etc. Dante condenses each person’s life into one most appropriate sin and devises a punishment that creatively and symbolically matches their misdeed.
 - The perfection of God’s justice.
 - In a sense, the punishment is almost an ironic joke played on the sinner by God, a **hyperbolic** extension of the sin that reveals the transgression and mocks the sinner.

- **The Nature of Sin**
 - This is one of the few areas where the Romans did not follow Greek thinking. For the Greeks, violence against another was the worst possible sin. Dante accepted the Roman cultural idiom of sin that defined deceitfulness and treachery as worse than violence. The “Trojan Horse” provides the best exemplification of this difference—what was clever for the Greeks was condemned as deceit by the Greeks
 - Sin is more than bad action, however. Dante as narrator has entered the midpoint of his life, and has lost focus on the importance of avoiding sin, represented by the Leopard, Lion, and She-Wolf.

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- Sin, for Dante, begins with being intellectually inattentive, and the poem's purpose is to reawaken the central character (and, by extension, the reader) to the reality of sin and the accompanying need for confession, repentance, and a return to the straight path that leads to eternal salvation.

- **Contradiction of God's Will What Defines Evil**
 - Dante's work is not a philosophical examination of the thinking of his time, but a reflection of orthodox Catholic teaching of the time.
 - Violation of the will of God is unacceptable at any level. Sin is more than personal misdeed, but it is violence against God.
 - Dante is considered the "Catholic Poet" because he does not question the orthodoxy, but embraces

- **Power and Limits of Reason**
 - In *The Inferno*, Dante values Reason almost above all other things. Virgil is regarded as the embodiment of Reason. Reason is contrasted with Appetite.
 - However, Reason has limits. When Dante reaches the end of his journey in Hell, Virgil must be replaced by **Beatrice**, because Faith ultimately is both more powerful and important than Reason.

