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## The Sinners In Dante's Inferno

The use of symbolic retribution, a punishment that is symbolized by the crime that was committed, is found throughout Dante's *Inferno*. In *Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri, Dante is first found in a dark forest where he encounters three different animals. After avoiding the different animals he is led through the nine layers of hell by Virgil, a Roman poet. Each circle of hell represents a different group of sinners. Circle one is the Limbo layer, where people are punished for not knowing Jesus Christ. Layers two through six are known as the incontinence circles; here, people are punished if they have committed irrational sins against God. In circle seven, people are punished for being violent; in layers eight through nine sinners are punished for fraud and malice. As Virgil and Dante venture further into the layers of hell, they see the crimes committed and the punishments getting more severe. Readers of *Inferno* are given the chance to better understand Dante's religious and moral beliefs based on the punishments he believes best fit the crime. In *Inferno*, Dante uses symbolic retribution to allow readers a glance into his religious beliefs by punishing gluttons in circle three, wrathful people in circle five, and treacherous people in circle nine.

In the third layer of hell, people who give into their physical desires to eat and drink no matter the outcome are found. As Dante is traveling through the third layer of hell with Virgil he describes the people he observes: "Red eyes he has, and unctuous beard and black, / And belly large, and armed with claws his hands" (Alighieri). This group of sinners, who were gluttons before death, are punished by becoming bloated and being immersed in filth while it rains down from the sky. Gluttons worship food and drinks because of their uncontrollable appetite. According to *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno: Notes* by Luisa Zamboni Vergani the gluttons "punishment is a reversal, and instead of eating the fine delicate foods and wines of the world, he is forced to eat filth and mud. Instead of sitting in his comfortable house relishing all of the sensual aspects of good food and good wine and good surroundings, he lies in the foul rain" (Zamboni 31). This certain sin causes a person to turn food into a god, so now instead of eating the fancy foods of the world and living a luxurious life, they are punished by being made to eat and live in mud. The guardian of the gluttons constant hunger "is a fitting guardian for the circle of gluttons, who transformed their lives into a continual feast and did nothing but eat and drink and now lie like pigs in the mire" (Zamboni 31). The hungry and bloated sinners in this layer of hell resemble pigs living in filth, similar to their guardian. Gluttony is considered to be one of the less vicious crimes of incontinence found in the nine circles of hell.

Another sin of incontinence that Dante encounters as he journeys through hell is anger, which he finds in the fifth circle. In this layer of hell, two different groups of people are punished. The sinners found in the fifth circle of hell are all confined to the Styx, a muddy swamp. The ones above the water are "the souls of those whom anger overcame" (Alighieri); while the ones beneath the water saying "'We sullen were / In the sweet air, which by the sun is gladdened, / Bearing within ourselves the sluggish reek'" (Alighieri). The two different groups in this layer of hell are those that were overcome with extreme anger and those that were sullen and did not believe in God. While the wrathful souls were being punished above the water, the gloomy souls were being punished under the water. The sinners punished to live above the water show "open and violent hatred, and the punishment is that they strike out at each other in almost any fashion" (Zamboni 33); however, the ones below the water display "slow, sullen hatred. The

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punishment for this type is that they are choking on their own rage, gurgling in the filth of Styx, unable to express themselves as they become choked on their own malevolent hatred” (Zamboni 33). The wrathful people manifested such great anger, that it could have led to violence; so, their punishment was to be covered in grime and constantly fighting with one another. The sullen sinners were punished by being exiled to underneath the Styx where they would be smothered by their own rage and emotions. The Styx, the river these sinners occupy, is considered to “[serve] a double purpose. It separates the upper Hell from the nether Hell, and it also functions as the circle for the wrathful. As the wrathful people were hateful during their lifetime, they are now in a river of hate” (Zamboni 33). Similar to the separation of the wrathful and sullen, the Styx is split into two different sections. The sin of wrathfulness is considered to be one of the worst sins of incontinence.

The last sin mentioned in Dante’s *Inferno* is treachery and can be found in circle nine. The punishment in this layer of hell is the worst by far, as well as the crimes that were committed that put these sinners here. In the final circle of hell Dante observes “a thousand faces, made / Purple with cold; whence o’er me comes a shudder, / And evermore will come, at frozen ponds” (Alighieri). The sinners found in this layer of hell are all punished by living in a frozen lake, and as they travel closer to the center the sins committed get worse. The occupants of this circle of hell are miserable and regret the sins they committed while living on Earth. These people long “to be forgotten on earth because of their vicious crimes, unlike those in the upper circle, who ask to be remembered” (Zamboni 72). The sinners in the upper layers of hell do not feel that the crimes they committed were bad enough to be forgotten. However, the treacherous sinners living in the ninth layer have realized how awful the crimes they performed actually were. This layer of hell is split into four different sections, called rounds: round one treachery towards kin, the second round is treachery towards country, the third round is treachery towards guests and hosts and the fourth round is treachery towards their masters. Satan resides in the center of the four rounds of treachery. Each round is named after a person who embodies these sins. In *Critical Insights: The Inferno* by Patrick Hunt the names of each round is explained: the first round is “named Caina (for Cain)” (Hunt 11), the second round is named “Antenora (for the Trojan Antenor)” (Hunt 11), the third is “Ptolemea (for Ptolemaeus)” (Hunt 11) and the fourth circle is named “Judecca (for Judas Iscariot). In Judecca are the most heinous human traitors” (Hunt 11). The individuals each round is named after becomes worse the closer towards the center, like the sins committed get worse as Dante and Virgil travel near the middle of the lake. The wrongdoers found in this layer of hell are considered to be the worst of the worst.

Throughout the entirety of Dante’s *Inferno*, Dante Alighieri uses symbolic retribution to express his religious beliefs. From his experiences exploring the nine layers of hell, readers are able to understand what Dante assumes will occur after death. In the third circle of hell, the gluttons lie in mud and resemble pigs. People who were overcome with extreme anger in life are found in the fifth layer of hell. Here, those who were wrathful were left above the Styx where they constantly tore at one another, and those who were sullen were enclosed beneath the river and left without being able to express their emotions. The evil-doers found in the final circle of hell were believed to have performed the most terrible crimes known to mankind. They live in an icy lake, and as Dante and Virgil venture towards the center the wrongdoings become worse. from Dante’s writings. From Dante’s *Inferno*, readers are able to better understand his religious and moral beliefs; for example, Dante believes there is a life after death and that the consequences of sin is punishment in the afterlife with varying degrees of punishment based on the sin committed.

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## Works Cited

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