God And Dante's Inferno

In Dante’s Inferno, Dante puts forth an insightful go between a person's sin on Earth and the “punishment” one receives in Hell. The point is clear. In simple terms these ideas provide many of Inferno’s points of thought-provoking imagery and symbolic power, but also emphasize one of Dante’s major themes: the perfection of God’s justice. The first time I came to this notion was when I was reading in Canto III, and over the gates there was an inscription that states that “God was moved to create hell by justice." (III, 7.) That word “justice” cuts deeper than even I realized, but I think that was Dante's intention all along. For instance, the Wrathful attack one another, the Gluttonous are forced to eat excrement, etc. Furthermore, Hells primary duty is to punish sin, and the punishments are meant to bear witness to the divine perfection that all sin violates, in the eyes of God, of course.

Undoubtedly, Dante as a Christian realizes the perfection of God’s justice; he is able to create a connection between a soul’s sin on Earth and the punishment he or she receives in Hell. Dante explains that God created Hell by justice. More specifically, when he was entering the Gates of Hell, the entrance reads on the gate, “Sacred Justice moved my Architect I was raised here by the Divine Omnipotence…” (Alighieri Canto III, 5) This accredited to the creation of Hell to God and his divine justice. God’s divine justice is exactly what shapes Dante’s nine circles of Hell and their punishments. For instance, the soul is sent farther away from God and closer to the Devil, depending on the seriousness of the sin. Additionally, Dante is aware of the qualities of God, first that He is morally right and always just, according to the Bible in Exodus 34:7, “…He will by no means clear the guilty” also that He is merciful “For God is love”(Kershaw 1 John 4:8) and, it is also stated that God’s Justice is described as fair when people receive justice, they receive the penalty they deserve, or they are repaid for the damages done to them, in the Bible, justice is related to the Law of Moses, which the Lord gave to the people of Israel as a gift for their protection and well being in the Old Testament of the Bible (Justice). Psalms 96: 13 tells us that “He [God] is coming to judge all people on earth with fairness and truth.”(Kershaw)

There is no doubt, Dante praises God’s justice in Hell, “O Sovereign Wisdom. How justly doth Thy power judge and assign!”(Alighieri Canto XIX, 10-13) however, he will still along his journey show pity for the souls, ”how could I check my tears, when near at hand, I saw the image of humanity distorted. Certainly I wept” (Alighieri Canto XX, 21), and fear of God's punishments and “there we saw what fearful arts the hand of Justice knows”(Alighieri Canto XIV, 17). This puts forth an image of a vengeful and cruel God, who was punishing harshly all those sinners, these reactions from Dante makes Virgil scold Dante assuring him that God’s justice is divine and perfect. “Who is more impious than one who dares to sorrow at God’s Judgment?”(Alighieri Canto XX, 30). Therefore, as a consequence of the amount and depth of the offenses that are being punished in Hell, it is understandable that Dante paints Hell as a place of perpetual pain and suffering.

This journey begins in the Dark wood; where as a reader we first see the “perfection of God's justice." In the first circle with all the non-Christian adults in addition to unbaptized infants, Dante depicts the mercy and justice of God, many of the great heroes, thinkers and creative minds of ancient Greece such as Homer, Horace and Lucan are located in this circle, although they do not suffer, because of the honor and merits they gained in Earth and Heaven, they are hopeless

and cannot gain their way into heaven, yet some of the major figures from the Hebrew Bible, according to Virgil, were liberated by Jesus following his crucifixion.

In the second circle, Dante analyzes the power of love over desire; He describes God as merciful and caring, but God's justice is more important, the lustful are located in this circle, they are the first ones to be truly punished in Hell, the souls are blown about to and fro by the terrible winds of a violent storm, without hope of rest. From the souls that are being punished here, Dante concludes that love should not be confused with sexual desires, even if the line that separates both of them seems really thin. Furthermore in the third circle are place those that are given out to carnal desires too, the gluttons who are forced to lie in a vile slush produced by ceaseless foul. In this circle Virgil tells Dante that the souls trapped here will not rise again until the Day of the Final Judgment where he also describes God as a just and fair "on which the host shall come to judge all men"(Alighieri, Canto VI,90).

The fourth circle is made up of the Hoarders and the Wasters. For punishment, they carry enormous weights, rolling them at one another, the in haste they rolled them back, and start all over again, creating a vicious cycle. In this region Dante starts to feel pity for those souls and is shocked for the first time at the power of God's justice. In the fifth circle are the two forms of anger located, the anger that is expressed and the one that is repressed, God's Justice in this region is seen when Philippo Argenti is attacked by the other souls after he tried to grab Dante, much to Dante's liking, and when God sends his angel to open the gates of Dis. Dante learns from Virgil that as the story progresses himself has been less inclined toward pity, and thus the text asserts the infinite wisdom of divine justice, where sinners receive their punishment in perfect proportion to their sin and to pity their suffering is to demonstrate a lack of understanding. As we move into the sixth circle, there is critical begins a much more serious descent into the realm where the sins turn into more severe and the punishments are harsher. In this area are located the heretics, they are tormented in fiery tombs because of their denial of the soul's immortality when they were alive, showing the reader once more how the seriousness of the offense towards God decides how He proportionally assigns the punishment.

In the seventh circle, are located the violent, these sinners are separated in three forms, given that each kind of violence is different to the creator, one are the violent toward others, for example killing someone, these souls are punished in a river of blood, another are the violent against themselves, these are the ones that commit suicide, they are punished more painfully than the previous sinners, they change into trees and they can only speak if a limb is broken off and they bleed, as in life they sought relief through pain, they are now suffering in Hell and are constantly being hurt seeking relief. The third group of violent sinners are the violent against God, these souls are the most painfully tormented souls of the group of violent, blasphemers, sodomites and usurers are placed on a burning plain while they are tormented by a rain of fire from heaven ceaselessly.

Consecutively, the eight circle is basically full of malice and forethought , the majority of the souls that are located in this circle are evil and when they were alive they knew they were being evil, and did nothing to change their ways, therefore the seducers, panderers, simoniacs, fortune tellers and diviners, grafters, thieves, hypocrites, evil counselors, sowers of discord and falsifiers are placed in this level, most of them serve painful punishments, Dante permits the reader to observe the perfection of God's justice, because even when all these souls are in the same circle, they are punished in accordance to the severity of their sins. For instance, the fortune tellers and diviners are permitted to walk with their heads backwards; the evil counselors

are sentenced to walk inside a flaming tongue and the thieves are bitten by snakes and burst into flames until ashes remain, and from the ashes the sinner reforms painfully.

As Dante gradually descents through every level of Hell, he finally finds himself in the ninth circle, this is the last circle and the most evil of all. This circle consists of the traitors and the Devil are located here. This level is divided into four regions: the Caina, the Antenora, Ptolomea and Judecca. The Caina is named after the biblical Cain, who was the first son of Adam and Eve, and who killed his brother out of envy (Kershaw Genesis 4 1-17). The second region is Antenora, is named for the Trojan prince Antenor, one of those in favor of returning Helen to the Greeks for the good of Troy, the third zone is Ptolomea, this region is named after the captain of Jericho, Ptolemy, who murdered his guests while they were being honored, and finally the last region is Judecca. this name is chosen by Dante because of Judas Iscariot, the apostle who betrayed Jesus, the Son of God. Here they are all encased in ice, however their punishment is proportional, some of the souls are covered up to their necks, others up to their eyes, only Judas is covered up to his head completely in ice.

This notion of ‘justice’ of God’s punishments is very clearly present in Dante’s larger moral messages and forms Dante’s Hell. Today’s readers see the torments Dante and Virgil witnessed as shockingly harsh. Such as things like: homosexuals having to endure an eternity of walking on hot sand, and those who charge interest on loans sit beneath a rain of fire. I think if you view the poem as a whole, it becomes clear that the guiding principle of these punishments is one of balance, as our class discussed. this notion of balance informs all of God’s chosen punishments because his justice emerges as rigidly objective, mechanical, and impersonal; there are no extenuating circumstances in Hell, and punishment becomes a matter of set rules. I think it was clear early in Inferno that Dante builds a great deal of tension between the objective distant actions of God’s justice and the character Dante’s human sympathy for the souls that he sees around him. In contrast, the story progresses and the characters become less and less inclined toward pity, and repeated comments by Virgil encourage this development. Therefore, this text demands the infinite wisdom of divine justice: sinners receive punishment in perfect proportion to their sin; to pity their suffering is to demonstrate a lack of understanding.