

Imagery and Symbolism in Dante's Inferno: An Analysis

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Abstract: *This research is an analysis of imagery and symbolisms in Dante's Inferno. Specifically, it looked into the images and symbols present in the first canticle of Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, the Inferno, thereby excluding the last two books – the Purgatorio (Purgatory) and the Paradiso (Paradise). This qualitative research utilized textual analysis in interpreting the different images and symbols found in the book. The analysis also examined figures of speech and other literary devices. This study is anchored on the mimetic or the classical theory which states that a literary work of art is a re-creation, a re-presentation, and a re-combination of what is found in reality. Dante's Inferno gives readers an insight of the reality and the nature of sin. Based on the analysis, it was found out that people, beasts, monsters, and places in mythology are found in the Inferno, and used by Dante allegorically in the poem. Dante in the epic was himself a Florentine poet but allegorically, he is the image of a Christian sinner who journeyed through hell, purgatory and finally to paradise where he can find peace and salvation. Virgil, his companion in hell, is the image of Human Wisdom, while Beatrice, the Divine Wisdom. Beatrice also symbolizes the "Blessed Virgin" or one of the "God-bearers". The three beasts: leopard, lion, and the she-wolf, symbolize sins and temptations. The leopard symbolizes lust, the lion pride, and the she-wolf avarice.*

Keywords : Divine Comedy, imagery, symbolism, Dante's Inferno, allegory, epic, analysis

1. Introduction

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri which critics say is a superb and magnificent creation of an intellect, is an allegorical masterpiece, a work of a truly gifted genius. Lovers of literature should appreciate how the Comedy was written; its style, its form, its characters, and its theme, all these conspired to make a masterpiece. The Comedy is not only a literary piece for appreciation but also a lesson in life. It not only enhances literary appreciation, it also helps mankind to know and appreciate how perfect God's creation is and how merciful He is. Before the reader will fully understand the whole picture of the Comedy, a richer background of the Inferno is needed.

Velasco remarked that the Divine Comedy is a difficult poem and it takes many readings to master it. Comprehending the allegory would be difficult without knowledge of the first canticle of the Comedy, the Inferno. On this concept, the researcher chose to work on this particular masterpiece of the first book – the Inferno. For as Velasco puts it, "for an appreciation of the world's greatest poem, the Divine Comedy, one must necessarily begin with the reading of the Inferno."

Most teachers, for discussions, depend merely on the questions found at the end of the selection in the books. Word associations, allusions, symbolisms and images, if not found at the end of the selection are seemingly left unattended to. That is why most students do not get a better insight and experience of human life as exemplified in literary pieces outside those that the teacher, based on the book, takes up. This problematic situation prompted the researcher to conduct this study which offers insights to teachers and students in the analysis of a literary work.

2. Objectives of the Study

This research aimed to analyze and interpret the text specifically found in the first canticle of the Divine Comedy, the Inferno. It looked into the images and symbols, as well as allusions which are found in the first book, the Inferno.

3. Research Design

This is a qualitative research employing textual analysis focusing on the imagery and symbolisms found in Dante's Inferno. The researcher has read the entire poem (Inferno) and listed all the images and symbols in all circles of hell. Using the more authoritative books of John Ciardi, Dorothy Sayers, and Allen Mandelbaum, the researcher has analyzed and interpreted the images and symbols. Some mythological characters were also taken to emphasize what these symbols and images mean.

4. Discussion and Analysis

Since the poem is allegorical in nature, it makes use of imagery and symbols. However, Dante's allegory is more complex. It differs from the standard type in two ways: (1) in its literal meaning, the story is up to a certain point and with a great many important qualifications, intended to be a true story; (2) the figures of the allegory, instead of being personified abstractions, are symbolic personages (Sayers, 1952).

Thullen's essay on "Imagery and Symbolism in Dante: A Virgilian Perspective" stated that Dante's portrayal of hell in the Inferno is an undisputed masterpiece of visual and allegorical imagery, enriched not only by extensive use of figurative language, but by concrete physical descriptions as well (Thuleen, 1992). A concrete example of this description occurs in Canto XIV, where the poets crossed over a river encased in stone, the story of the giant statue buried in Mt.

Ida on the island of Crete whose falling tears form the waters of the three rivers of the underworld.

Much of Dante's imagery can be discussed as a picture made out of words, says Sayers. She added that a great part of his poetic strength lies in his power of using words to make a visual picture, so that it is as though the things he describes are seen by the reader's eyes. His images are pictorial and symbolic. In the Inferno for instance, though Beatrice is not present in hell, she symbolizes one of the "God-bearers" or the Blessed Virgin. Her function in the poem as Sayers stated is to bring Dante to the state in which he is able to perceive them directly – she is in fact the vehicle of the Glory (Sayers, 1949).

Dante's Inferno is predominantly visual, he believes that sight is the most powerful. He combines sight, sound, hearing, smell and touch with fear, pity, anger, horror, and other emotions to make his readers involved to the point of actually experiencing his situation and not merely to read about them (Ciardi, 1982).

"When I had journeyed half of our life's way, I found myself within a dark forest." (Inf. 1:3)

This is the opening line of the Dante's poem. Dante, in the story is Dante himself, the Florentine poet. In the allegory, he is the image of a Christian sinner who journeyed through hell to find peace with God in paradise. The *dark forest* is a metaphor for everything that Dante thought was wrong in 1300. It includes sin and other imperfections of the world. His Inferno contains his hatred for the people who had been "evil" in his time especially during his exile, as opposed to Paradise.

"I faced a spotted leopard, all tremor and flow and gaudy pelt." (Inf. 33:29)

The leopard is one of the three beasts Dante had encountered. The leopard is thought to symbolize lust, a self-indulgent sin of incontinence.

"Yet not so much but what I shook with dread at the sight of a great lion that broke upon me raging with hunger." (Inf. 43:29)

The lion is one of the three beasts Dante encountered. It symbolizes pride. The symbolism is apt because the lion is regarded as the king of the beasts, lording it over animals, ferocious and violent.

"And down his track, a she-wolf drove upon me, a stored horror ravaging and wasted beyond all belief." (Inf. 47:29)

The she-wolf in the allegory symbolizes avarice or cupidity. Avarice because a she-wolf is one animal that would devour any living thing on its path. The three beasts symbolized sins and temptations.

"Not man, though man I once was, and my blood was Lombard, both my parents Mantuan." (Inf. 67:30)

This line refers to Virgil. He represents Human Reason sent by Beatrice to accompany Dante through hell and purgatory. Virgil is still the poet in the allegory, Dante's favorite. He was even put by Dante in the contemplative place in hell, making sure that in the allegory, Virgil does not suffer punishment.

"It is I, Beatrice, who send you to him, I come from the blessed height for which I yearn. Love called me here." (Inf. 70:37)

Beatrice is the lady whom Dante loved so much. In the allegory, she represents the Blessed Virgin who accompanied Dante in the paradise. Though she is not present in hell, she symbolizes one of the "God-bearers" who inspired Dante in his journey. In the Divine Comedy, she was placed by Dante in paradise where diamond, gold, and other precious gems are mined. The Heavenly Messenger is the image of Divine Revelation. Dante and Virgil are helped by the Heavenly Messenger in entering the city of Dis. The city of Dis separates the nether hell from the lower hell. The rest of the circles are in the city of Dis.

"And he, who knew these handmaids well, they served the Queen of never-ending lamentation." (IX-43:79)

The queen of never-ending lamentation is Persephone. She is also the Queen of the Underworld, wife of Pluto in Greek mythology. Pluto or Hades carried her away from the earth and made her Queen of Lower World.

As Queen of the underworld, she was mentioned by Dante in this circle because she laments her being in the underworld for half a year, a kind of sullen anger withdrawing into a black sulk where there is no joy. Though she is not in the Inferno, Dante's mentioning of her name is but appropriate, she being the Queen of the underworld.

"At one single point, there suddenly stood three infernal Furies flecked with blood, who had the limbs of women and their ways, but wore as girdles, snakes of deepest green." (IX-37:79)

The Furies are placed in the underworld to punish the evildoers. The Greek poets thought of them chiefly as pursuing sinners on earth. They were inexorable but just. The heads of the Furies were wreathed with serpents and their whole appearance was terrifying and appalling. In Greek mythology, they were the avenging goddesses who haunted those who had committed great crimes. In the Inferno, they are the images of the fruitless remorse which does not lead to penitence (Longfellow, chaosafe.com). Dante placed these Furies as the guardians of the city of Dis. They represent the conscience.

"Just let Medusa come; then we shall turn him to stone", they all cried. (IX-52:79)

She was once a beautiful maiden in Greek mythology whose hair was her chief glory, but as she dared to vie in beauty with Minerva, the goddess deprived her of her charms and changed beautiful ringlets into hissing serpents. She became a cruel monster so frightful in aspect that no living thing

could behold her without being turned into stone. All around her dwelling place were seen stony figures of men and animals.

In the allegory, she is the image of despair which so hardens the heart that it becomes powerless to repent (Sayers, p.127). She is an example of ferocious anger that inflicts destruction and pain on all those that came upon her. Therefore she is placed by Dante as the guardian of the city of Dis because of her characteristics.

“Once before, it was true, I crossed through hell conjured by cruel Erichtho who recalled the spirits to their bodies.” (Inf. 19:88)

A legendary sorceress taken from Lucan, who summons a spirit from the dead to reveal to Pompey the outcome of the battle of Pharsalia. In here, Dante mentioned the name of Erichtho to imply that Virgil’s knowledge of hell is extensive and indeed authoritative.

“The suicides are transformed into strange tress, and the squanderers are hounded and rent by bitches. The desolate forest made up of black, twisted trees which bled if they were broken”.

This is one of the most striking scenes in hell. The sin of suicide is an insult to the body, so here, they are deprived of even the semblance of their human form. As they refused life, they remain fixed in a dead and withered sterility. They are the images of the self-hatred, which dries up the very sap of energy and makes all life infertile (Longfellow. Chaoscafe.com). The bleeding trees are the image of the self-hatred that makes life infertile. The sad dark forest is the nesting place of the foul Harpies.

“O Capaneus, for your arrogance that is not quenched, you’re punished all the more”. (XIV-63:127)

He was one of the seven legendary kings who besieged Thebes. Apparently, Capaneus boasted that even Jove could not stop him. Capaneus’ boasting is the image of the sin of pride and arrogance.

“Sodomites endlessly crossing the fiery sands beneath the rain of fire”.

Sodomy or homosexual vice is named from Genesis XIX. The images of the sand and burning rain are taken from the doom of Sodom and Gomorah in Genesis XIX. The Sodomites are chosen as the image of all perverse vices which damage and corrupt the natural powers of the body.

The panders and seducers exploited the passion of others and so drove them to serve their own interests, are themselves driven and scourged. (8th circle)

In here, the image is a sexual one but allegorically, panders and seducers are the images of the exploitation of every kind of passion like rage or greed.

“Now Geryon, move on; take care to keep your circles wide, your landing slow, remember the new weight you’re carrying.” (XVII-97:155)

Geryon was a monster with three bodies living in Erythia. Geryon symbolizes fraud itself. His face was human, gracious and honest looking but his body was a combination of a bear and a serpent, and his tail had a scorpion’s sting. He had a different form and was not particularly associated with fraud. However, the connection is quite clear. Someone who commits fraud appears to be just and good, just as Geryon’s head is noble in appearance but their hidden motives are evil, just as Geryon’s body is bestial and his tail is venomous.

“And she who covers up her breasts, with her disheveled locks, who keeps all her hairy parts to the far side was Manto.” (XVIII-52:181)

She was the daughter of Tiresias and a famous sorceress. The primary image of sorcery here is that of the fortune-tellers, who, having attempted to usurp God’s prerogative by prying into the future, are now so twisted that their eyes and feet face in opposite directions (Sayers, p.198). Most of them tried to force the future, for which their heads are now turned backwards so that they cannot see in front of themselves at all. This is an image of the twisted nature of all magical art, which is a deformation of knowledge, and especially of the psychic powers, to an end outside the unity of the creation of God (Longfellow. Chaoscafe.com).

Sinners are walking in gilded cloaks lined with lead. They were dressed in magnificent gilded robes made of heavy lead. (8th Circle, 6th pouch)

The lead cloak is the image of hypocrisy, presenting a brilliant show but weighing like lead so as to make spiritual progress impossible (Longfellow. Chaoscafe.com). Hypocrisy say good things in front, pleasant like the gilded robe, but mean another thing when the back is turned, like the heavy, cheap lead which is made to appear like gold.

The giants Ephialtes, Briareus, Antaeus, Typhon, and Tityus are seen in Cocytus, the central pit of hell. (9th Circle)

Cocytus is the well of hell where the last river freezes. The giants dwell in this place. In here, they are the images of blind forces which remain in the soul (Sayers, 269). The giants represent the sin of pride as they rebelled against the gods, that is why they are placed at the bottom of hell.

5. Conclusions and Implications

The first book of the Divine Comedy which is the Inferno abound with symbolism and imagery. Images strike at the senses. Images such as the gilded leaden cloaks wore by the hypocrites that make spiritual progress impossible; the fortune tellers in the eighth circle whose heads are twisted, as they look forward, they are compelled to walk backwards; the desolate forest of the suicides in the seventh circle, being deprived of their human form, the image of the self-hatred; the dark forest is the metaphor for everything that Dante thought was wrong; the bleeding tress in the suicides which

is the image of self-hatred; the raining fire of the sodomites which is the image of all perverse vices. These are but few examples of images found in the first canticle of the Divine Comedy.

It can be an implication that Dante is really a genius. He used figurative language to convey his meaning. He also has a broad knowledge of mythological characters which he used to add flavor to his masterpiece.

Symbols refer to images that stand for something. Dante himself represents a Christian sinner who journeyed through hell, purgatory and paradise. The three beasts symbolized sins and temptations; the lion is an image of ferocity and violence but it symbolizes pride, the leopard symbolizes lust and the she-wolf symbolizes avarice or cupidity; the Furies are the image of the fruitless remorse, symbolized the conscience; the Heavenly Messenger is the image of Divine Revelation but in the allegory, symbolized the conscience, safeguarding the mind against false doctrine; Geryon, a mythological character, symbolizes fraud; the giants in the ninth circle represents pride and arrogance.

The Inferno is full of images and symbols which implies that Dante is creative. His imagination is so wide that his Inferno encompasses other literary pieces. His creativity as a writer and a poet is seen in his Divine Comedy.

6. Recommendations

The researcher has these recommendations:

- 1) Since this study is focused on the first book of the Divine Comedy, it is suggested that a similar study be conducted dwelling on the other two books, the Purgatorio and the Paradiso.
- 2) Teachers of literature should use the analysis presented in this paper in teaching the epic Divine Comedy.
- 3) A close reading of the text should be done so that students will appreciate the masterpiece of Dante since the epic is very long.
- 4) Dante's Inferno should be taught in High School. It should be included as one of the topics in literature for high school students because of its images and symbols, and lessons as well.

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