

Q) Analyse the Christian themes of Dante’s “inferno” in terms of its relevance to and his reflection’s on his contemporary society?

“Oh enslaved Italy! Place of sorrow, ship without captain in a storm, not respectable lady but place of corruption” (The Divine Comedy, Purgatorio, VI 76- 78)¹

Dante Alighieri had seen the State of Florence in all its corruption, treachery, and fed up with the Medieval world and its trappings began the writing of his work that would encompass his life, and become a milestone in Dante’s acknowledgement in literary history.

His masterpiece the “*Divina Commedia*” (Italian for the Divine Comedy), containing the allegory of human suffering “*Inferno*”, has been seen throughout history, as a model of the moral and religious complications of Medieval culture, but most of all the Medieval world.

Dante very much was involved in the political life of his town Florence. From a contextual perspective, Florence was in political turmoil, with the papacy’s fraud in gaining power in the state, and the conflicting political leaders of the time opposing the papacy’s demands. Dante played a major role in this tug of war of power and authority and is a major focal point of why the “*Inferno*” was written, and it’s underlying audience and message, that pervaded its composition.

The Guelfs and Ghibellines were the main social and political factions of medieval Florence, and thus it is no coincidence that in “The inferno” commentaries on the political parties and their affect on Florentine life are evident. Dante was affiliated with the Guelf party in favour of the pope, made up of the city’s lesser nobility and artisans. Whilst the opposing party, the Ghibellines, heavily supported imperial power and the Holy Roman Emperor, and was mainly made up of old feudal nobility.²

¹ Unknown,(1997) *The Divina Commedia*, [internet] Dante Alighieri on the web <http://www.greatdante.net/commedia.htm>, [date accessed 2/11/03]

² David Felfoldi, (1998) *Guelfs VS Ghibellines*, [internet] <http://www.arches.uga.edu/>, The University of Georgia [date accessed 11/3/03]

For Dante this political corruption, treachery, and deceit, was a form of hell on earth for Dante, and embarked on his literary journey to reverse this ideology that had encompassed society.

The Christian themes enveloped in the text the *Inferno* are very much mirrored on the political and social issues of Dante's context and thinking.

Justice is a major underlying theme that undermines the text, and explored as Dante plunges deeper and deeper into the depths of Hell. From a Christian perspective, hell exists to punish sin, and his poetic language explores this through obvious symbolism and character use from a historical perspective. In canto X, Dante enters the circle of Heretics the 6th circle of Hell, where Farinata Degli Uberti meets him (The head of the Ghibelline party for 25 years and Great War chief of the 12th and 13th century). As an obvious illustration of Dante's political bias, Farinata is depicted as the pinnacle of 'sinner' as he substitutes the love of God for politics and political pride.

“It is Farinata rising from the flames...

He rose above the flame, great chest, great brow;

He seemed to hold all Hell in disrespect”³

Said to be one of the most driving and theatrical passages in the entire poem, the background of hell is almost lost among the references to “flame”, as the two political rival's face each other and their continuing debate on who is right. Thus Dante reanimates the theme of justice through his confrontation with Farinata, who under Gods judgement is sentenced to suffer in Hell, among the heretics.

This one example of many in the text, of the theme of Justice, acts as prophetic poetry warning Florentines of the evils that awaited them in Hell.

Another theme expressed in the text is the connected theme of sin and redemption. The *Comedy* itself is Dante's salvation from sin, symbolizing the whole conversion or deliverance of mankind.

³ D. Alighieri, translated by J.Ciardi. (1982) The Inferno. New York:New American Library.

The setting and the first lines of the poem are crucial to this understanding, as Dante enters the gates of Hell, he gazes at the inscription overhead;

*“Through me you enter into the city of woes....Justice moved my high maker, in power divine wisdom supreme, love primal....All hope abandon, ye who enter here.”*⁴

Dante must acknowledge sin before he can be redeemed. From a contextual perspective, Dante was trying to bring the point across in his works, the importance of overcoming this whirl of sin that had captured Florentine and medieval society. He imagined his inferno and his later finished work *“The Divine Comedy”* would reverse this “remorseless process of disintegration”⁵

The inferno is also an obvious organization of the severity of evil, as a response to Dante’s own beliefs, and most especially doctrinal Christian values. His moral system prioritises not human happiness on Earth, but rather God’s will in Heaven. ⁶ In Canto XXXIV we see the climax of the poem, with Dante and Virgil reaching Lucifer at the bottom of hell. Here we see how influential religious doctrine and Dante’s own personal concerns were in describing the deepest of sinner and the religious symbolism he developed to reinforce his ideas.

*“That soul my master said, who suffers most is Judas Iscariot... of the other two who twist their heads down, the black mouths hold the shade of Brutus.... Cassius is the sinewy one on the other side”*⁷

Thus by the end of the poem, Dante manages to tie his main political themes with his religious concerns and values. By showing Lucifer chewing on Judas (the betrayer of Christ), Cassius and Brutus (the betrayers of Julius Caesar) he unites his concerns of church and political affairs and states their equal importance. Contextually once again, this reinforces the idea of getting the attention of society to

⁴ (Pg. 25 line 1-7) Pinsky, R (ed) (1994) The Inferno of Dante. London. Orion publishing

⁵ L. Pertile,(1996). Dante Alighieri. Cambridge History of Italian literature. Cambridge university press

⁶ (2001) spark notes on Dante Alighieri’s Inferno. [internet] Barnes and Noble learning network
<<http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/inferno/themes.html>> (accessed 20/11/03)

⁷ (pg 369 line 61- 66) Pinsky, R (ed) (1994) The Inferno of Dante. London. Orion publishing

acknowledge their own sins, and returning back to the Christian way of life that had become disillusioned during the middle ages.

In conclusion Dante's epic "*The Divine Comedy*" and his prologue, "*inferno*", is a mirror image of the philosophical, political and religious paradigms of 13th century thinking. Dante's anger and outrage at his beloved state Florence, its people, and most of all the power play between church and state all played a major part in contributing to the motive for his literary work. His Christian themes of Sin and redemption, Justice under Gods judgement, and the severity of evil in his own eyes all contribute as a reflection of society's ideals and of Dante's own personal values and attitudes.

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