



Shivani Jayaprakasam  
Humanities 4 (sophomore)  
Lauren Jackson, Humanities Teacher  
International Community School  
Kirkland, Washington  
March, 2021

### Canto Illustration Rationale

2020. Just hearing the word makes you take a step back. A lot has happened this year and a lot of it has been hell for a lot of us. From a violent pandemic, to the US presidential election, to racial injustice, 2020 unarguably can be described as an inferno. My inferno consists of the prevailing issues trapped in my thoughts. Surrounded by constant news updates, I have often been feeling overwhelmed and locked-up in my own emotions. This piece helped me depict how hope creeps into us and puts a positive spin to the present inferno of 2020.

Dante's *Inferno* has many allegorical elements many of which come from the characters of beasts and sinners. The most repeated and common form of Dante's allegories are the contrapasso, or correspondence between the punishments of the sinners and the sins they committed in life. The punishments of hell demonstrate the divine justice of God because sinners suffer punishment to a degree appropriate to that of their sin's nature: the sullen choke on bile<sup>1</sup>, the wrathful fight one another<sup>2</sup>, and the gluttonous are forced to eat garbage, surrounded by their waste<sup>3</sup>. This idea of God's justice in punishment is revisited in each circle of Hell, which has a new sin with a group of new characters and sinners.

Hell's circles are organized by Christian values, which prioritizes God's will over human happiness or Earth's harmony. Therefore, for example, a sin such as accepting a bribe, punished in Circle 8 of Hell, is considered worse than murder, a sin punished in Circle 6 of Hell. In my inferno, the lower on the paper, the deeper in hell and worse the sin is. The deeper in my inferno

the sin is, the more prevalent the issue is in my mind and the news. The top layers consist of a modern-day representation of gluttony and hoarders, followed by three layers of violence against neighbors, and lastly the root of all evil, COVID-19, which tempts humans toward evil sins in upper levels, like the role of Satan in Dante's *Inferno*. The trees and hills above the inferno symbolize the Earthly world we live in, just as the "Dark Woods" Dante was lost in<sup>4</sup>. In my mind, I wanted these layers of hills to represent my physical appearance, as seeming happy and simple on the surface, but constantly burdening myself with anxiety of the current news.

Throughout Dante's epic poem, the imagery of light, connotating goodness and God, and darkness, representing evil and lack of faith, is heavily emphasized. Not only are there woods, Dante begins the epic poem in a location plainly called "Dark" Wood and comments numerous times during the various circles of hell about the darkness of Hell. On the other hand, the Mount of Joy, God, and heaven are all associated with light, which is emphasized by describing the sunlight as divine illumination. Brightness represents hope, as seen by the sun at the top of my drawing. Hope keeps people going forward, even when life gets hard, like how hope grows from the sun, which illuminates the whole planet. As hope creeps through my inferno, it changes the inferno events, like hope does in real life. When sinners learn their lesson from their justifiable punishment, hope reaches out to them, so the reformed sinners can climb up to another chance.

Like other repeated imagery in Dante's *Inferno*, in all circles of my inferno, there is a flow of blood or tears. This not only creates unity among the various circles, but also adds to the idea of hell being violent and full of punishments, because blood generally has a negative feeling. Dante often includes symbolic beasts in his allegory, for example Geryon's "face was innocent of every guile" but "under it his body was half reptile," symbolizes fraudulence, the sin punished in the following hell circle, VIII (Canto XVII, Lines 9-12). I wanted to continue this

symbolism in my piece, so I created characters to correspond to my circles of hell, which can be seen in the explanation of each level.

The top layers of my inferno consist of overeating due to stress, representing gluttony, as well as the panic hoarding of toilet paper and cleaning essentials, representing the hoarders in Dante's original epic poem. Both events are placed here, because they were personally stressful and difficult to deal with, but with my morals, they were comparatively less bad and easier to emotionally move past than the following events. On the left, there is an overweight demon who is eating the gluttonous humans, whose souls are stuck inside the food items, so they cannot even run or scream. This cycle of souls<sup>5</sup> becoming stuck inside food and the demon eating them one at a time occurs for all eternity<sup>6</sup>. The vines of hope nudge the demon to share his food, so the souls stuck in food can realize and learn from their sin and possibly reform. To the right, the people who hoarded sanitary supplies are punished by chasing a shopping cart full of toilet paper forever. Whenever the cart seems just in sight, it moves farther and farther away. Here, the vines of hope just the runner some slack by dropping some toilet paper rolls for the runners to dry their tears.

The three middle layers representing Dante's sin of violence against neighbors, contain 2020 issues of school shootings, the undocumented immigration crisis, and racial inequality. These are placed in the middle, because I believe that violence against anyone is the worst sin possible. On the left is the area where school shooters get punished. Here, the souls of the shooters go into the children they shot, and for the rest of eternity, they must watch a demon with their body kill them in the body of the child they killed. Hope tries to hold the gun back and make the shooter think about what they are about to do. To the right of the school shooting is the US-Mexico border, where humans are denied the right to escape poverty, gang violence, and

more. In this section, the border patrol, and corrupt US national representatives, who take basic rights away from immigrants lacking documentation, must live through the lives of the Mexican/Southern immigrants to learn to understand new perspective.

Directly under these two layers is the racial unjust which has come into light this year. I decided to put this layer closer to the bottom, because it has been on my mind and disturbed me the most. People of color have been fighting for their right for almost as long as they can remember, and women of color have twice the battle. Falling into this category myself, I wonder if my future is as bright as some of my other friends. I hope that nobody else gets treated differently just because of their skin color. Racists are punished in hell by constantly watching their sins and the lives they mistreated and ruined. Snakes burn the eyes of the racists causing them to bleed while watching their sin. The vines of hope try to close the eyes of the sinner, and only succeed if the sinner repents and realizes their sin.

Finally, the deepest and last layer of covid-19 stands for the devil because it is considered as the origin of evil in 2020. From the beginning of this year to the end, one the only things that has been consistent is the constant spread of covid-19. In my inferno, the main punisher, or Satan, is portrayed as having the body of the corona virus. Hope cannot reach this level, which is seen by the vines not reaching the virus. This represents how covid-19 took lives, friendships, and businesses that do not have any hope left, with no other chances.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>“Peace, you wolf of Hell. Choke back your bile and let its venom blister your own throat” (Canto VII, Circle 4: Hoarding & Waters, Lines 8-9).

<sup>2</sup>“the madman turn and start their weight again to crash against the maniacs” (Canto VII, Circle 4: Hoarding & Waters, Lines 34-35).

<sup>3</sup>“Here they lie through all eternity, themselves like garbage, half-buried in fetid slush...” (Canto VI, Circle 3: The Gluttons).

<sup>4</sup> “Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood” (Canto I: The Dark Wood, Lines 1-3).

<sup>5</sup> “The souls descends and others take its place” (Canto 5, Circle 2: The Carnal, Lines 13-15).

<sup>6</sup> “I come to lead you to the other shore, into eternal darkness” (Canto 3: The Vestibule of Hell, Lines 83-84).

#### WORK CITED

Alighieri, Dante. *The Inferno*. Translated by John Ciardi, Signet Classic, 2001