

Emilie Berman  
Bryn Mawr School, Baltimore, MD  
Dante Senior Elective at Gilman School

**“Just Win, Baby”-- Competition and *Inferno* 10**

It is easy to blame a condition on being the result of humanity, to say, “hey, it’s not me, everyone is like this.” And I think this is easy because then nobody has to take the blame for any condition whatsoever. Not the parents, or the grandparents, not the school, or the neighborhood, or anything; no one is to blame when it’s just a condition of society. I liked to think everyone was naturally selfish, that is how we survived, to work for ourselves, to live for ourselves. I thought that mothers were the exception, mothers who give up their lives, their well-being for the life of something else, someone else. I thought they must be unique and every other aspect of life is selfish, and naturally so. Recently, though, I’ve found that I can’t be sure if humans are naturally selfish. This whole issue makes me think of math. In math, if one thing does not apply to the rule then the rule is null, a contradiction proven through example. Therefore, at least in mathematical terms, if mothers exist then humans cannot be naturally selfish.

Competition, too, is another one that seems to be advocated as just being part of human nature, of nature in general. Evolution exists purely as a competition, where nature picks the best fit, the best. Well, if we’re taught, quite literally, that the best are the ones who survive, then of course we’ll duke it out to the death; nobody wants to lose the absolute fight, what a morbid, morbid loss. So from a young age I’ve been brewed in competition with a sibling who loves the three letter W-I-N word. Growing up seems to be a non-stop competition, from who ate dinner fastest to who got better grades this semester. I realize from looking back on it, that I was never really doing things for myself, that I couldn’t have been doing things for myself when my goal

was not to do my best, to work my hardest, but to be “the best”. And competition is addicting. I can’t just win one game, I must win all the games, I must jump the highest, run the fastest, come in first every time. And as soon as I lose, I must make up for it by winning the next 10 games, the next 20 games, the next 100 games, until I feel like everyone else has forgotten. But, I, I will never forget. The pain from a loss is lasting, the pain from a loss hurts even when the loss has drifted away, far away, from anything that is present, that is now.

I wrote once in my journal that, “The best is not the best because one can always do better.” I look at that now and think, what a Farinata-like approach to my own existence. It’s strange to read it thinking that I am only one self, who could I possibly be trying to one up? I think this must be how Dante felt after his conversation with Farinata. He walked away “thinking back on that speech which seemed hostile to [him]” (Alighieri Inf. X 121-122). Not only is competition addictive, but it’s contagious, too. Dante may not have started as a competitive person, but being in conversation with a competitive person is like putting fuel next to a fire, it is inevitable that one will light the other. And I don’t think Dante jumps into this whole game because of a natural competitiveness, but more because of honor for himself and his family. Farinata insults him and his family, and to be bigger than that, to not engage, is so hard when the target is so close to the core of who he is. Such a large part of the pilgrim’s identity is his Tuscan heritage, his family who raised him. It’s hard not to defend these things, but there must be another option than to compete back. There must be a way to defend without trying to one up the other, and without sounding desperate to maintain the family name. Honestly, I’m not sure what this would be. I struggle with the same issues. I struggle with a competitiveness that is so easily brought out by others. It lingers, quietly, but there all the same, under a facade of coolness. And it is “hostile”, hostile in the sense that it is wildly over-powering (Alighieri Inf. X 121-122). It

can grasp, clench, strangle, the sense out of me. My morals are at the will of a contagious addiction, my beliefs all subject to its command. It's like being hypnotized, the first action is conscious, but the following are those of some other power. And so, like Dante, I don't realize my state, the hostility of my actions and words, until afterwards.

What might be even worse, is that I thought my competition was okay, coaches had always encouraged a little "friendly competition". But, it's always been more than that. It's never just been friendly competition, it's been constantly summarizing accomplishments with one number, one letter, one score, just for the easy distribution of competition. To compete with numbers is so simple because numbers are one dimensional, I can write my numbers on paper, I can write every number on paper. But how much of a genuine achievement can be written on paper? How much hard work can be shown in numbers, letters, scores, pluses, minuses, all of it? How much growth can be shown that way? But these numbers aren't about the work. I hardly ever hear people, including myself, talking about how hard they worked on something because they really enjoyed working on it. People usually just talk about the number they received, and if they are talking about how hard they worked it wasn't out of a love for learning, it was out of hopes for a certain number. And, thinking about it now, how strange it is that we are talking so incessantly about numbers in the first place, because it seems like people don't really care about the numbers at all really, but what the numbers mean. But, the numbers are one dimensional, the numbers can be written down, the numbers can be mass distributed, engraved on a printing press and copied for an eternity. And so the numbers have been what I've sought, I seek. I won't pretend that I'm a changed person, or as Mrs. Dalloway would say, I cannot say "I am this, I am that", but I am more conscious, ever since reading about Farinata, of my own competitiveness, as well of the competitiveness that crowds me (Woolf 9).

The day we talked about Farinata in class, I had advisory and we talked about what we were going to carve our pumpkin into for the Halloween pumpkin carving activity. A “pumpkin spice” we decided, what a fun idea. “We will win” was my advisors immediate response. Win, how wonderful, but “it’s not about winning”, I said to the advisory, trying to fight the Farinata-like thoughts suffocating me in the small room. It is about doing our best, about doing my best. I will constantly be reminding myself, forever, for eternity, it is about doing my best. Even when my advisor counters me, laughing, but all the same, “no, some things are just about winning”, then I must stand tall. I must not let the contagion consume me, make me one of those who is engulfed by the competition, who makes it her goal to be “the one who wins, not the one who loses” (Alighieri Inf. XV 124). To be in that sort of competition is to place the world into a binary, make it into a scoreboard, one that doesn’t even have the capability to show timeouts or fouls. A single purpose scoreboard that never shows which team practiced the most, or worked together the best, but only to show a score, a one dimensional number. And why not work towards more substantial things than numbers, why not push the boundaries of “successful” from just a dollar amount to something more meaningful, something more fulfilling than something I can simply write on a piece of paper.

### **Work Cited**

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