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Cocytus: A Treacherous Allegory for Slavery

In Greek Mythology, Cocytus is the river of wailing, and comparably, in Dante's *Inferno*, that river comprises of dead sinners frozen in the pain of their own tears. The last three Cantos of *The Inferno* feature this ice-bound terrain of the Ninth Circle, with icy gales and Satan himself punishing them for treachery against personal ties. Not only does the frozen river imprison the sinners of the worst sin, it is the home of the devil himself, Satan, and it supports all the other layers and Circles of Hell as the base. Through his descriptions of the sinners' punishments, Satan, and the overall scenery of Cocytus, Dante creates an allegory for slavery in the U.S. through the Ninth Circle further showing a vicious cycle of treachery.

In this Circle, the sinners of treachery represent modern-day slaves because they are attacked by the wind and gales and can't escape the torture. Afraid to raise their heads against the biting gales, each sinner holds "his face bowed toward the ice, each of them testifies to the cold with his chattering mouth," shielding themselves from "a wild and bitter wind" (268, 283). Similar to how slaves were sometimes whipped by their owners as punishment, the sinners of treachery try to protect themselves from the harsh whipping winds. Most slaves were also punished almost constantly in one way or another, just as these sinners were endlessly berated by the relentless winds. In addition, the sinners were trapped in unfortunate positions, "Some lie stretched out; others are fixed in place upright, some on their heads, some on their soles," all

trapped in the ice by Satan, whose wings beat winds that “blew from him in one great storm” (283, 284). The sinners, trapped in agonizing positions in the ice, couldn’t escape the frozen river, and even if they did the wind would hurt them more than the ice, just as if a slave tried to escape from their master and cruel life of bondage. If they tried to escape, they would face worse fate from the master punishing their escape once the master caught them. Because of how the snowstorm and ice torments the sinners of Cocytus, the sinners represent slaves in the modern-day world.

Satan, the Emperor of the Universe of Pain, exemplifies the thousands of slave owners, as some slaves sought freedom from their masters, but soon realized that instead all their torture and pain originated from him. In the *Inferno*, Dante imagines that Satan “was once as beautiful as now he is hideous, ... well may he be the source of every woe!” (284). Slave owners represent a new chance for slaves to earn freedom for themselves, just like Satan may once have looked beautiful. However, in parallel with how Satan is now hideous and the source of all their woes, slave owners became symbols of punishment which oftentimes diminished all hope. In their eyes, the sinners saw Satan as “the Emperor of the Universe of Pain” (284). Their masters, instead of radiating the hope for freedom, rather radiate the fear and pain that they force onto their slaves, akin to the Devil himself. Thus, through his façade of fake beauty lined with his torturous ways, Satan symbolizes previous slave owners, punishing sinners of the worst sin: treachery.

As for the physical location of the bottommost circle, Cocytus supports all the other circles of Hell like how slavery supported all the different parts of the economy. According to Dante, the river Cocytus filled with the souls of treachery described the “final dismal hole which bears the weight of all the steep of Hell” (267). The frightful river of ice, combined with all the

treacherous souls and Satan, supports all the other circles of Hell, like how slavery and free labor supported a huge part of our economy. Without previous slavery and labor, no one would do the menial tasks included in jobs such as working a farm and our economy would collapse because less people would have jobs and less produce would be manufactured, such as how all the other circles of Hell would collapse if not for the bottommost icy layer made up of treacherous sinners.

So, what does this comparison mean to the modern world? Well, according to Dante, the sin of treachery towards those with personal ties, such as family, country, guests, and most importantly, their masters, and these sinners closely resemble slaves. Moreover, slaves treacherous to their masters end up in more punishment for their actions, which makes them want to escape even more, which in turn would result in more punishment. This vicious cycle coincides with Dante's point, further emphasizing how awful the sin of treachery is. In short, the ninth circle Cocytus in Dante's *Inferno*, through the portrayal of the sinners, punishments, scenery, and Satan, constructs an allegory for slavery in the U.S., in addition, generating a vicious cycle of treachery.

Works Cited

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