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The Effects of Sin on Humanity's Moral Disposition in Dante's *Inferno*

After a perilous journey through a savage forest, Dante reaches the foot of a hill and desperately desires to climb it: "After I had a little rested my weary body, I took / my way along that deserted slope, so that my / halted foot was always the lower" (28-30). In the act of walking, Dante describes his left foot as dragging behind his right foot to reveal the relationship between the two components of the human soul: the intellect and the will. The intellect is represented as the right foot, and the will is represented by the left foot. While the intellect sees the objective clearly, the will is distracted by momentary troubles. In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante explores how man's fall affected the human condition by recognizing the constant inner struggle between the desires of the intellect and the will. Through his portrayal of an intrinsically evil forest in Cantos I and XIII, Dante examines how temptation and sin guides people down the wrong path towards desolation and suffering. In doing so, Dante reveals how people's actions and attitudes flow from their relationship, or lack thereof, with God.

Dante's rendering of the symbolic dark wood emphasizes how sin separates people from God. In Canto I, Dante conveys his anguish as he attempts to recall the forest at the beginning of his journey: "Ah, how hard a thing it is to say what that wood / was, so savage and harsh and strong that the / thought of it renews my fear!" (4-7). By waking up in a dark and savage forest, Dante reveals that sin has pervaded his life and has become an obstacle in his relationship with God. Dante emphasizes this idea by creating a similar setting in Canto XIII: "Not green leaves, but dark in color, not smooth branches, but knotted and twisted, no fruit was there, but thorns with poison" (4-6). Dante describes the forest in abounding detail in this canto compared to

Canto I by expanding on the dark color of the leaves, the smooth shape of the branches, and the presence of thorns instead of fruit. Dante's negative diction in his illustration of the dark wood in Canto XIII conveys more fear, terror, and darkness, which reveals how the sinners are significantly more separated from God. Dante conveys his corrupt moral state at the beginning of his journey in lesser detail because he doesn't fully understand sin's influence until Virgil leads him on this journey. In Canto XIII, Dante demonstrates that he understands sin to a greater extent by using imagery to portray the forest in more detail. By describing an evil and dark forest in Cantos I and XIII, Dante reveals that sin prevents a relationship with God.

Furthermore, the unmarked and twisted paths through the dark forest represent sin's destructive ability to lead people away from salvation. Dante begins his poem by stating, "In the middle of the journey of our life...the straight way was lost" (1-3). Dante reveals a common morality and humanity with all souls on earth from the first line of his *Divine Comedy* by using the pronoun "our". By becoming a sort of Everyman, Dante suggests that he will embark on this journey on behalf of all human beings in order to develop a deeper understanding of how human action obstructs the soul from salvation. Dante uses the path as a symbol for the spiritual journey that he embarks on for all human beings. By describing the path as wicked and distorted, Dante reveals that his voyage through life has become unclear as a result of sin's influence on his life. Remarkably, Dante describes a similar situation in Canto XIII in which he "entered a wood that no path marked" (1-3). The parallels between the two distinct paths highlight how sin blinds people; it prevents individuals from clearly seeing where to turn to on their journey through life. In a world filled with light, sin leads people to walk around as if they were blindfolded, aimlessly searching for purpose. By illustrating the unmarked path through an evil forest in Cantos I and XIII, Dante reveals that without God, people's lives become meaningless and disoriented.

In addition to the symbolic depiction of a lost path through the forest, Dante's personification of the hill in Canto 1 further emphasizes sin's destructive nature. As Dante continued forward on his journey through the savage forest in Canto 1, he "reached the foot of a hill" (13) and "looked on high and saw its shoulders clothed already with the rays of the planet that leads us straight on every path" (16-18). The hill is personified as having shoulders, which represents human beings between the depths and the heights. The pilgrim desires to move towards the sun, which is the source of wisdom, knowledge, and goodness. However, he finds himself unable to do so because his path is blocked by three creatures: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. Each of these three creatures represents a sin that prevents Dante, along with the rest of humanity, from reaching the light where God's presence abounds. In addition, the plants in Canto XIII are personified as people. As Virgil and Dante travel through the seventh circle, Dante hears cries of suffering in the darkness: "...so many voices, among those thickets, came / forth from people hidden from us" (26-27). Dante reveals how these sinners' choices to give into temptation landed them in an eternal suffering. Dante's description of the hill and personification of plants demonstrates how sin prevents people from obtaining redemption.

Moreover, the metamorphosis of the souls who have been violent against themselves reveals sin's ability to corrupt the union of the body and soul. The structured and repetitive syntax at the beginning of Canto XIII emphasizes how the souls have been converted into something other than what they were from the moment they arrived in hell. On earth, all humans are endowed by their creator with a body and a soul. However, sin's influence leads individuals to obstruct that perfect union and destroy their bodies. The perfect punishment for these sinners is to continue their existence in the underworld without a body; because these sinners discarded their bodies willingly, they are now unable to retrieve them. The repeated negation in each of the

first three tercets when Dante writes “[n]ot green leaves, but dark in color, not smooth branches, but knotted and twisted, no fruit was there, but thorns with poison” (4-6) demonstrates how these sinners no longer have God’s presence in their lives. Dante uses ironic transubstantiation of these sinners to show that humans must exist as embodied beings: separating the unity of the body and soul is sinful. Dante emphasizes the importance of preserving the body by transforming the sinners in Canto XIII from animals to vegetation.

Dante’s journey through hell begins by an unmarked path in Cantos I and XIII, which leads him towards a savage forest. The strikingly similar settings convey humanity's inclination towards sin, which leads people away from fellowship with God. By contrasting the ubiquitous darkness with the light at the top of a hill, Dante demonstrates how people should always strive towards enlightenment and goodness. Furthermore, the metamorphosis of souls in Canto XIII emphasizes sin’s attempts to destroy the perfect union between the body and soul. In short, Dante’s travels through the underworld provide insight into sin’s ability to destroy and distort human nature.

Works Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno*. Edited and translated by Robert M. Durling, Oxford UP, 1996.