

Artistic translations of Dante's Inferno

Lucia Guercio, School of Art History, supervised by Dr. Alistair Rider

Aims

From a careful study of Dante's Inferno, the project sheds light on its significance in contemporary era. Given the great artistic potential of the poem, various artists' perspectives are brought together to underline the universality of Dante's work. Dantean imagery shaped both religious and laic understandings of the afterlife, making the poem a very powerful visual tool. Four core cantos are analysed, emphasizing how modern and contemporary artists interpret Dante's work through their own life experiences.

Canto I – The Forest Dark

Synopsis

- Dante finds himself lost in the forest symbol of his sin, after eventful encounters, he finally meets Virgil his guide through Hell (and salvation)

Visual characteristics

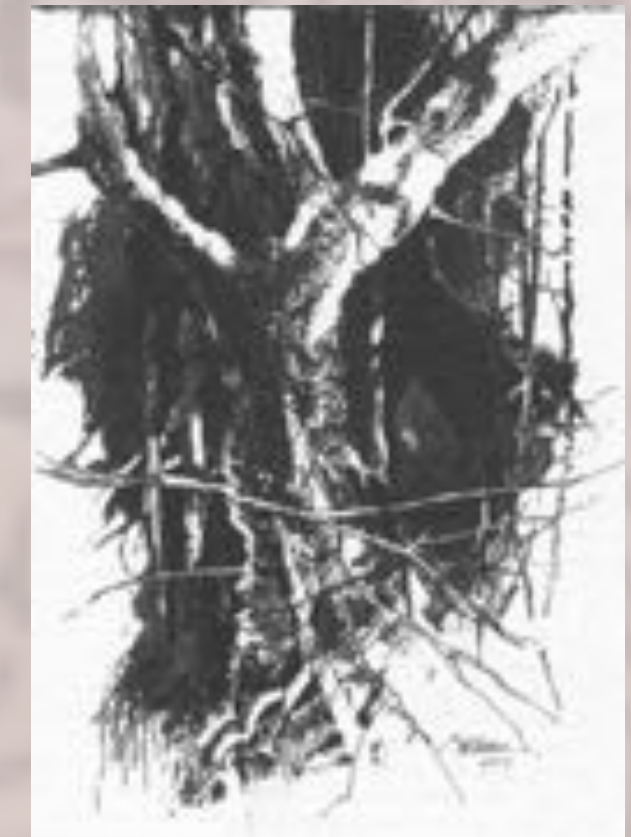
- The language is highly visual, describing the forest as “savage, rough and stern”

Common traits

- All the artists (Benedetto, Moser, Graba' and Denning) have a minimalistic approach
- Focus is on the underpinning psychological implications of the forest, recalling also mental health issues. The outlook is mainly labyrinth-like and with strong chiaroscuro



Fiona Hall, *Inferno, canto III: the Gates of Hell*, 1988. Polaroid photograph, 61.0 x 51.8 cm. Exhibited at the Art Gallery of New south Wales, Sydney.



Barry Moser, *Canto I*, 1980. Ink on paper. In *Barry Moser's illustrations for Inferno*, (trans) Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Bantam Books, 1980.

Canto III – The Gates of Hell

Synopsis

Dante and Virgil cross the Gates of Hell and start their journey in the afterlife world

Visual characteristics

The Gates are described as magnificent and frightening, on the top words carved in somber colours warn the bystanders - they are reaching the “city dolent” and “all hopes should be abandoned”

Common points

The majestic gates are appealing to artists (Hall, Rauschenberg, Rodin) as a singular and grandiose geometric construction, representing the material passage between life and death

All the artists focus on majestic proportions, spiky lines and an overall frightening and chaotic ensemble

Canto V – The lustful lovers

Synopsis

- The souls of the unfortunate lovers Paolo and Francesca are destined to be torn apart by whirling winds; however they manage to tell Dante their story of extramarital love which condemned them. This is the most romantic canto and even Dante abstains from judging them negatively

Visual characteristics

- The whirling vortex is itself very choreographic as it is an “*infernal hurricane that never rests*”
- The impossibility of reaching the loved ones and the climatic tension of the scene has made this canto a preferred by artists

Common traits

- The focus is mainly on the vortex and the damned souls, living Dante apart as just a secondary character in this powerful canto



Renato Guttuso, *Dante. Divina Commedia. Inferno. Canto V*, 1967. Watercolour on paper, 35x50 cm. Galleria d'Arte Moderna Raccolta Lercaro.

Canto XXXIII – Conte Ugolino, the hungry traitor

Synopsis

Dante's contemporary Conte Ugolino is eating the skull of his political enemy Archbishop Ruggeri, who forced him and his children to death by starvation

Visual characteristics

Ugolino's hate against Ruggeri is exemplified by the bite: his anger becomes tangible, erasing the gap between feelings and actions

Common traits

All the artists (Phillips, Le Brun and Martini) use variation of black and white tones

The focus is on the character's monstrosity, their human nature is denaturalized emphasizing rocky and frightful traits



Tom Phillips, *Canto XXXIII*, 1981. Lithograph on paper, 292x203 mm. Tate Modern, London.

Conclusions

Even more than six-hundred years apart, Dante's masterpiece is still capable of inspiring artists. This is because the Divine Comedy is not merely a literary work, rather it is a comprehensive corpus relating on spirituality, science, politics and art, aiming to showcase the multi-faceted human nature in relation to the cosmos. It could be considered as the greatest literary allegory of all times, where every reader can identify with the text to some extents. Artists engage with such material, not only for its striking visual potential but also due to its underpinning and enduring implication of staple of culture.



I would like to dedicate this project to my grandfather, unanimously renowned as innovative Dante scholar and professor. I am also extremely grateful to the Laidlaw Foundation for selecting me and to Lord Laidlaw for allowing us students to pursue high-level research and development from such a young age.



Finally, a special thanks to Dr. Rider for having believed in my project since our first meeting: his supportive words and meaningful advice have been a highlight of my research experience.

References

- Alighieri, Dante, *Divine Comedy – Inferno* (ca. 1321), trans. Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry (online), Lander, WY: Wyoming Catholic College, 2008. Available at: <https://wyomingcatholic.edu/wp-content/uploads/dante-01-inferno.pdf>
- Barricelli, Jean-Pierre, 'Dante: Inferno I in the Visual Arts,' *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 114, 1996, pp. 15-39, p. 18. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/40166594.
- Bordieu, Pierre, 'Outline of a sociological theory of art perception,' *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Guercio, Luigi 'Orientamenti per gli studi della letteratura italiana,' *Scritti Vari*, trans. by the author. Salerno: Scuola Arti Grafiche Orfanotrofo Umberto I, 1984, pp. 16-37
- Koslow, Francine A. 'Fantastic Illustrations to Dante's Inferno: Romantic and Contemporary Visions,' *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 2, 4 (8), 1990, pp. 133-43. Available at: www.jstor.org/stable/43308069