

Use of Irony in “Inferno” and “Utopia”

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Introduction

Dante Alighieri is considered Italy's one of the finest poets who has made a major contribution to impacting Western culture. The Divine Comedy is one of his masterpieces and is regarded as an epic poem in the world of literature. It has been divided into three parts: Inferno, Paradiso, and Purgatorio. The whole piece offers an encyclopedic description and overview regarding the attitudes, mores, philosophies, beliefs, material aspects, and aspirations of the modern world. This epic work demonstrates the poet's journey through Heaven and Hell.

The most famous and majorly studied portion of the whole piece “The Inferno” depicts the experiences of the poet while he traveled through the various parts of the Hell. He was led by his protector and mentor, the Roman poet Virgil. The Hell was constructed in the form of a big funnel having nine descending circular ledges. There had been a chamber, huge and meticulously organized. Sinners had been carefully categorized in the chamber depending on the nature and level of their sins. They had to undergo dreadful punishments for which the poet gave a ghastly consideration to detail. People who had realized and expressed guilt and embarrassment about their committed sins had been given a chance to enter Paradise by means of the gruelling procedure of purification. The author continues this part in the other section, known as Purgatorio. The whole piece “The Divine Comedy” gained enough fame and popularity, which faded in the time of the Italian Renaissance. It got its significance back in the 19th and the 20th century. People started studying and examining its structural unity, symbolism, and narrative strategy. The philosophical and philological aspects of the poem were studied by the philosophers, theorists and the linguists. The poem depicts the harsh and bitter reality of the human condition in the rhyme of eternal magnificence.

“Utopia” is the most popular work of St. Thomas More, an English knight who later became the Chancellor of England. The book “Utopia” is a dialogue between More, the sailor Raphael Hythloday and More's friend Peter. The topic discussed in the dialogue is the different issues and problems with the European governments compared to those of the Utopian nation. The sailor Hythloday believed in unorthodox moral and political positions and conveyed his beliefs and thoughts in relation to the story of his stay at Utopia, which, according to him, was [an ideal government](#) and society. Peter and More discuss politics with Hythloday, who demonstrates his complaints and issues against the English law. The law that disturbs Hythloday the most is the [death penalty](#) for thieves in England. According to him, death punishment urges criminals to kill or murder the people they rob. Apart from this, Hythloday commented on the corrupt European leaders and said that whoever decided to serve them would merely give up his morality and virtue.

“Either they will seduce you by their evil ways, or... you will be made a screen for the knavery and folly of others” (More). The author makes use of the ideal government or society, ‘Utopia’, in order to condemn the real society in which he was residing. The people of Utopia did not argue or fight over religious subjects, did not own private property, did not give importance to the accumulation of wealth, and kept their people away from undesired combats. They valued freedom of expression and tolerated various beliefs. The book plays the role of a comment on the [political and social problems](#) of his time. It gives the readers a thought and a vision of how a perfect and ideal society could be established.

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Dante, being the narrator of the story of his journey through Hell, makes use of irony to give meaningful thought to the way people make their choices, which then lead them either to Hell or Heaven. Their decisions and choices in this life impact the results of the afterlife. The people suffering from the punishments of Hell were displayed, making use of situational irony. It occurs when the results are the opposite of the person’s expectations. Dante first tells how ironic it is that a person lives his life full of desires and wishes, not realizing that death will overtake him some time.

“I was so full of sleep just at that point

When I first left the way of truth behind.”

These lines (11 and 12, Canto 1) tell the bitter reality of life that all human beings are busy leading their lives full of wishes and desires or, as the author said, “full of sleep” that it makes them away from the path of truth. This is the main irony of all our lives. We all expect that whatever we are doing will lead to something good and nothing bad can befall us. The author uses leopard, lion and the she-wolf as metaphors for the desires of a man. He says that a man’s hope in God becomes weak in front of all the lusts and desires waiting to be followed (lines 44 and 45, Canto 1).

“But hope was not so strong that I could stand

Bold when a lion stepped before my eyes!”

Dante depicts in the poem how the wishes, false hopes, and desires make a man live in despair, and the consequences are even more distressing. “... *who had made many life in wretchedness*” (line 51, Canto 1). When the poet meets Virgil, he takes him through Hell to make him listen to the “groans of hopeless men” (line 115, Canto 1). These hopeless men are the sinners who have been suffering from the punishment of Hell and wish for “a second death” (line 117). The term ‘second death’ has been used ironically here, which implies that the sinners want another life so that they can lead their lives

according to the commandments of God and be completely away from their sins. Then Virgil talks about those people who are in the fire for some time, and they're waiting for their purification and salvation so that they can be among the blessed people. When the author feels cowardly, he calls upon the great-hearted man who says to the author (lines 45-48, Canto 2),

*"Your spirit has been bruised by cowardice,
Which many a time so weighs a man's heart down
It turns him from a glorious enterprise—
As shadows fool the horse that shies away."*

Here, the phrase "as shadows fool the horse that shies away" is used ironically for the cowardice of Dante, who was fearful of moving further on this journey through Hell. Finally, when the author gained the courage to come near to those who were suffering in pain and misery, he heard the cries of despair. And when he asked about what these cries were all about, the answer came (lines 34-36, Canto 3),

*"And he to me: "This state of misery
Is clutched by those sad souls whose works in life
Merited neither praise nor infamy."*

This is an extremely ironic comment for those people who think that if they haven't committed any sin and have not done any good to the people, they are not sinners. Thus, Dante's work "Inferno" is an irony on all kinds of humans living on this Earth who think they will not be judged for what they did, or their bad deeds will be forgiven, or their wishes and desires will lead them to the right path. Hence, the irony is regarding the views and perceptions of humans about death, the afterlife and the system of God.

On the other hand, "Utopia" is an account of the irony of how people are governed and how they would like to be governed. When the author's friend Peter told the seaman Hythloday that due to his great knowledge and ideas, he could be very useful to the king, Hythloday replied that he wouldn't be a slave, to which Peter clarified that he wasn't asking him to become a slave. In response, Hythloday said, "The change of the word does not alter the matter" (More, pp.16). The author presents the irony in the form of a dialogue and covers all the aspects of the government. "For your lords are readier to feed idle people than to take care of the sick" (More, pp. 21). Here, Hythloday makes an ironic

comment on God that he takes more care of the idle people who do not want to work for their living or are corrupted people than healing the sick ones. Hythloday points out to those corrupted leaders that why would they rob when their stomachs are already turned out of doors (More, pp.21). The seaman sensibly raises an ironic argument: what kind of justice is this? The system itself produces thieves and criminals, and when they're caught, the same system punishes them.

The society which Hythloday presents is the ideal society in front of him and should be formed, but the author More uses this idealism as an irony that this so-called ideal government or the system of society cannot be accepted without a question since it represents a system which can be gained by complete removal of one's individuality and whose wealth is dependent on slavery. People aren't allowed to do what they want or move as they please. This implies all faithfulness and allegiance to the country, though there are many other significant factors as well, such as the family. Putting the two pieces of the works together, it can be observed that the "Inferno" by Dante presents an irony on the human's views about the afterlife while "Utopia" is an irony on people's views about an ideal society or the government. Hythloday proposes various stances and arguments in the dialogue "Utopia" on how a government and a society should be, which can neither be attained nor is this society helpful for so many reasons.

The author asserts that this is all the game of mind about how we think what the ideal society is, otherwise if such a society came into being, it would no more be an ideal society or an ideal government. These ironical comments and discussions take place in the form of dialogue, while Dante's ironical statements are in the form of poetry. The poem is an irony on the government of God, while the dialogue is an irony on the government of the people. "And Dante dooms his wily, prideful Ulysses to Hell for false counsel" (theimaginativeconservative.org). Here, Ulysses is Hythloday of "Utopia" who could have been in the Hell of "Inferno" for his false counseling and justifications.

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