

## Adaptations of Dante's *Commedia* in Popular American Fiction and Film

Philip Edward Phillips (Middle Tennessee State University)

The punishments reflect the sins in Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. Indeed, drawing upon Augustinian and Thomistic theology, Dante creates punishments in the circles of the *Commedia* that hauntingly reveal to the reader the nature of each sin and the damned condition of each class of sinner. Dante identifies the logical relationship between sin and its punishment in the *Commedia* as "contrapasso," or "counterpoise," as translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in his 1867 translation of the *Inferno*. The concept of "counterpoise" is related to the Old Testament notion of exacting "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," but it is far more complex notion. Dante uses the troubadour poet, Bertrand de Born (ca. 1140-ca.1215), who was responsible for encouraging discord between King Henry II of England and his son, the young Prince Henry, as the defining

example of “counterpoise” in the *Inferno*, Circle 8, Bolgia 9. The pilgrim Dante says to his guide, the great Roman epic poet, Virgil:

I truly saw, and still I seem to see it,  
     A trunk without a head walk in like manner  
     As walked the others in the mournful herd.  
 And by the hair of it held the head dissevered,  
     Hung from the hand in the fashion of a lantern,  
     And that upon us gazed and said: “O me!”  
 It of itself made to itself a lamp,  
     And they were two in one, and one in two;  
     How that can be, He knows who so ordains it. (*Inf.* 28.118-126)

The speaker’s highly visual description forms the basis for the allegory, here and throughout the *Commedia*. Because Bertrand de Born brought division, specifically between father and son, he is punished eternally by having his head severed from his body. Dante compares his sin to that of Achitophel, who fomented enmity between Absalom and his father, King David. The punishment has been “ordain[ed]” by God, whose divine justice in Dante’s vision exacts a punishment that is both appropriate to the crime and an extension of the nature of the sinner himself. To put it another way, the punishment acts as an external manifestation of the sin that predominates the particular sinner. Speaking of his role to Dante and Virgil, Bertrand de Born summarizes his present condition and the reasons for it:

Because I parted persons so united,  
     Parted do I now bear my brain, alas!  
     From its beginning, which is in this trunk.  
 Thus is observed in me the counterpoise. (*Inf.* 28.139-142)

Just as sin is a willful separation of the sinner from God, in Augustinian terms, the divinely-ordained punishments in Dante's *Inferno* reveal in both physical and spiritual terms the nature of that separation. That there is no hope in Dante's Hell is intended to be a reflection not of God's callousness towards humanity but rather humanity's desire to act sinfully rather than to accept God's love and to love one another.

While the symbolic significance of Bertrand de Born's punishment for sowing discord is clear enough, another example--that of the thieves, also in Circle 8--is more complex. Like the punishment for divisiveness, the punishment for theft reflects not only the nature of the crime and its consequences for the victims but also exacts a punishment commensurate with the crime. Dante's narrator struggles to explain to the reader what he regards as nothing short of a "marvel" (*Inf.* 25.47) when he describes the grotesque metamorphoses that occur as part of the thieves' punishment. Observing with horror two of that region's denizens, Dante writes:

As I was holding raised on them my brows,  
Behold! a serpent with six feet darts forth  
In front of one, and fastens wholly on him.  
With middle feet it bound him round the paunch,  
And with the forward ones his arms it seized;  
Then thrust its teeth through one cheek and the other;  
The hindermost it stretched upon its thighs,  
And put its tail through in between the two,  
And up behind along the reins outspread it.  
Ivy was never fastened by its barbs  
Unto a tree so, as this horrible reptile  
Upon the other's limbs entwined its own.  
Then they stuck close, as if of heated wax

They had been made, and intermixed their color;  
 Nor one nor other seemed now what he was;  
 E'en as proceedeth on before the flame  
     Upward along the paper a brown color,  
     Which is not black as yet, and the white dies.  
 The other two looked on, and each of them  
     Cried out: "O me, Agnello, how thou changest!  
     Behold, thou art neither two nor one."  
 Already the two heads had one become,  
     When there appeared to us two figures mingled  
     Into one face, wherein the two were lost.  
 Of the four lists were fashioned the two arms,  
     The thighs and legs, the belly and the chest  
     Members became that never yet were seen.  
 Every original aspect there was cancelled;  
     Two and yet none did the perverted image  
     Appear, and such departed with slow pace. (*Inf.* 25.49-78)

This and other strange permutations reminiscent of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* characterize the *bolgia* of the thieves. In this case, the punishment entails not only transformation but also the very loss of identity. Indeed, the thieves punished in this region find that nothing they possess is safe, just as in life their acts of theft robbed others not only of their possessions but more importantly of their very security. The identification of thieves with reptiles seems just; the slow and painful loss of self is the perfect "counterpoise" for one who robbed from others in life. Not merely do Dante's thieves lose their physical identity, but also their "original aspect" is destroyed. Their metamorphosis results in their "perversion," which is intended by Dante to be a grim reminder of how their earthly turning away from God to pursue lives of theft defined their mortal nature. As they acted in life, so now in the afterlife do the thieves seek to

deprive others of their goods and their very identities. Others' goods, however, are worthless; once obtained those goods can be seized by others, and the cycle continues.

Written over the years of Dante's dolorous exile from Florence on false charges of political corruption and completed in the final year of his life, the *Commedia* earned its author a reputation as Italy's preeminent epic poet. Dante the poet achieved what Dante the pilgrim experienced in Circle 1 (Limbo), that is, a place of honor among the pantheon of great poets, whose company included his master and guide, Virgil, Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan (*Inf.* 4.94-102). In scope and symmetry, Dante's *Commedia* rivaled and even surpassed the works of many of that company of poets: the tripartite structure of the *Commedia*, which includes *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, reflects the tripartite nature of the Holy Trinity. The three "songs" of the epic are of identical length: each division contains thirty-three cantos, with the exception of the *Inferno*, which contains thirty-four cantos (the first functioning as the Prologue to the entire poem). The total number of cantos in the *Commedia* is one hundred, which is the square of ten and was considered the perfect number in Dante's time. The perfection of the one hundred cantos, then, is also meant to reflect the perfection of God. Aside from reflecting the Trinity, the number three figures prominently in the three divisions of Hell itself. The damned are arranged into three main groups within nine circles, according to the sins of the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf encountered by the narrator in the Dark Woods, which represent the divisions of incontinence, violence, and fraud, respectively. Although readers since Dante's time, and certainly readers today, tend to be more fascinated and familiar with the *Inferno*, leading to the conception that Dante was reoccupied solely with evil, it is instructive to note that the souls consigned to Hell makes up only one-third of Dante's *Commedia*.

The other two-thirds featured in Dante's work either continue to seek the love of God (in *Purgatorio*) or enjoy eternal participation in God's love (in *Paradiso*). Dante's allegorical epic, beginning in misery and ending in happiness, illustrates to the reader that while the damned are denied hope, hope still remains to the living to choose rightly by seeking God.

Dante's grand vision in the *Commedia* continues to fascinate readers, whether Christian or otherwise, because the issues that Dante addresses are timeless ones rooted in the human condition. Dante asks the big questions concerning life and the afterlife that human beings continue to ask to this day. Dante's answers, while grounded in and reflective of his Roman Catholic faith, are ones that seek to provide a sense of divine order in a world seemingly bereft of order while pursuing a system of symbolic retribution, purgation, or reward that often features personages from Dante's own world who are punished or rewarded in accordance with Dante's personal estimation of their actions in life. While beautifully symmetrical in form, Dante's *Commedia* necessarily reflects its author's artistic vision, his political leanings, and his understanding or construction of divine love and divine justice for a world—in his case, fourteenth-century Europe—sorely needing justice. The same fascination with sin and the desire for order continues to inspire Americans' interest in Dante's epic and the uses to which Dante's vision can be adapted in contemporary film or fiction.

The poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow deserves considerable credit for introducing American readers to Dante. While the *Commedia* had been translated previously by Henry Francis Carey in Britain, Longfellow's translation of the *Inferno* by Ticknor and Fields in 1867 (followed separately by *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*) was the first American version of the *Commedia* and the first to draw large numbers of new readers to the Italian poet. Longfellow introduced

Dante to an audience of American readers at a time when the intellectual climate of Harvard favored the Latin and Greek classics and actively discouraged the dissemination of works in vernacular literatures, especially Roman Catholic ones. Longfellow began to write his translation at a critical time in his own life, that is, in the aftermath of his wife Fanny's tragic death by fire in 1861 and his son Charley's enlistment in the Union army in 1863. Like Dante's Florence, Longfellow's America was in the midst of civil war, and many shared the poet's desire to find order in chaos. Longfellow, himself, sought to assuage his grief by throwing himself into the task of translating Dante's cantos.

Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, contemporary American novelists and screenwriters remain fascinated with Dante and his vision of the afterlife. For example, Matthew Pearl's *The Dante Club* (2004) features a series of murders in 1865 in Boston when Longfellow was in the process of translating the *Commedia* into English with the assistance of a group of his friends that included James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Eliot Norton, and George Washington Green (who would offer comments on selected passages translated by the poet before having dinner at his home). The serial killer in Pearl's novel bases his murders on the punishments meted out to the sinners in Dante's *Inferno*. The novel includes a State Supreme Court Justice being punished as a neutral (with his head split open and his wounds filled with strange maggots), a minister punished for simony (with his body buried upside down and his feet set aflame), a philanthropist who created division between the Harvard Corporation and the translators being punished as a schismatic (with his body sliced exactly in half, from top to bottom), and the Harvard Treasurer being punished for treachery (placed in the ice of the Cambridge Fresh Pond, though rescued and not killed), all directly inspired by the punishments for

corresponding sins in the *Inferno*. Like the Harvard Corporation, which wanted to maintain the classical hegemony in the College and to keep out anything “foreign,” especially anything Roman Catholic, the “victims” of the serial killer suffer deaths that directly parallel the punishments in the *Inferno*. The killer, a Civil War veteran named Dan Teal, who is emotionally scarred by the events of the war, is exposed to Dante’s *Inferno* in a series of public lectures given by Green and inspired to exact vengeance on those guilty of trying to prevent the publication of Longfellow’s translation of Dante, the poet, in his view, who really seemed to understand the need for divine justice in the world.

The 1998 film, *What Dreams May Come*, directed by Vincent Ward and based on a 1978 novel by Richard Matheson, also draws upon Dante’s *Commedia* in its imaginative depiction of both Heaven and Hell. The film’s title, taken from Hamlet’s famous “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, establishes the context of the movie: death and the “undiscovered country.” The film includes a journey to the underworld when Chris Neilson (played by Robin Williams) dies in a car accident and finds himself in a heaven based upon scenes from his wife’s paintings. Chris and his wife, Annie Collins-Nielson (played by Annabella Sciorra), were soul mates, and their life together was idyllic until the tragic death of their two children. Overcoming Annie’s suicide attempt, depression, and institutionalization following the children’s deaths, the couple nearly divorced but instead reaffirmed their love. Chris’s death shortly thereafter plunges Annie into depression again and suicide over her husband’s death. Rather than joining him in heaven, Annie is consigned to the region of Hell for the violent, including the violent against themselves: the suicides (cf. Dante, *Inf.* 13.1-108 [Circle 7]). Because his love for Annie is so strong, Chris cannot be happy in heaven without her. With the assistance of his guide and a “tracker,” Chris embarks on a quest to locate and retrieve his wife, whose punishment for



suicide resembles Dante's idea of "counterpoise" in terms not of its nature but of its logic. Chris finds Annie in a dark and dilapidated version of their house. Just as in life, so to in death does Annie's depression cause her to turn inward; in hell as in life, she cannot see beyond her own grief.

While Annie had returned to "life" after their children's death when it came to the point of divorce, now it is only Chris's selfless offer to remain with her--to share her Hell even though she does not recognize him--that restores her and enables her to love again and to share Chris's heaven. *What Dreams May Come* reinterprets Dante's vision of the afterlife to include both a Heaven and a Hell, but ones that are not eternally fixed and in which the souls of the dead can continue to choose to love God and to love each other, such that one soul's love for another soul can be transformative and restorative. In this way, Chris's love for Annie functions similarly to the way that the prayers of intercession by the living can positively affect the souls of the dead in Dante's *Purgatorio* (See *Purg.* 3.145). In a further twist, *What Dreams May Come* ends not only with the reunion of Chris, Annie, and their children, but also in the couple's desire to be reincarnated so that they can live, meet, and fall in love again in order to "get it right" the next time. Because they are true soul mates, it is implied in the film that they are sure to meet and to fall in love with each other again.

Perhaps, though, the most successful contemporary adaptation of Dante's *Commedia* is *Seven* (1995), directed by David Fincher and written by Andrew Kevin Walker. In this film, a serial killer, John Doe, tortures and murders his victims employing the concept of "counterpoise" from the *Commedia*, but his selection of the seven deadly sins--Gluttony, Greed, Sloth, Envy, Wrath, Pride, and Lust--as the basis for choosing the number and types of victims and punishments comes not from Dante's *Inferno* but rather from the seven terraces

of *Purgatorio*, as if to suggest that our world is not, as John Keats would call it, a “vale of soul making,” but rather a place of trial and punishment for most, though perhaps a place of purgation for the few. The film calls viewers’ attention to the here-and-now of the film: a rainy, dark, dirty, and broken city in which two detectives struggle to make sense of a series of murders that are gruesomely methodical in their execution. The film replicates Dante’s penchant for symmetry as well: the number seven refers to the seven deadly sins and to the seven days of the investigation leading up to the conclusion of the events.

Some of the more graphic representations of Dantean “counterpoise” in *Seven* are the punishments and deaths for gluttony and lust. The serial killer, known only as John Doe, punishes gluttony by forcing a morbidly obese man to continue eating spaghetti until his internal organs burst. The detectives find the victim face down in the bowl of spaghetti with his hands and feet bound. It soon becomes clear that there is “meaning” behind the killer’s “madness.” In Dante’s *Inferno*, the gluttons are punished in Circle Three, a region guarded by the three-headed dog Cerberus (a fitting representative of insatiable hunger). Like the world depicted throughout *Seven*, Dante’s Third Circle is assailed by “rain/Eternal, maledict, and cold, and heavy” (*Inf.* 6.7-8). Wherever they turn, Dante and Virgil cannot escape the “[h]uge hail, and water sombre-hued, and snow” (*Inf.* 6.10), where the gluttons, submerged in filth, are assailed by rain and torn by Cerberus’s claws. In *Seven*, John Doe metes out what he considers “like penalty/For the like sin” (*Inf.* 6.56-57) by holding a gun to his victim’s head, forcing him literally to eat himself to death.

John Doe punishes lust by forcing a man to wear a bladed sexual devise to rape and kill the prostitute whom he came to pay for sex. The prostitute dies a gruesome and tortuous death, and the man is left an empty shell of himself. When Detectives Sommerset and Mills question the manager of the underground

nightclub about the incident and the lack of security that enabled the killer to bring such a device into his establishment, he responds with apathy: the world is a place where human beings do things that they do not like. And yet, as the film suggests, apathy is not a virtue. Nor is the man who was forced to rape the prostitute "innocent"; he had not intended to act as he did, but he had gone to the nightclub in order to satisfy his lust.

Gluttony and lust are both examples of excessive love and thus lesser vices in Dante's *Purgatorio*. They are included in Upper Hell (containing the incontinent) in *Inferno*. Envy and wrath, on the other hand, are both examples of misdirected love and thus greater vices in *Purgatorio*. Envy could equate to the kind of treachery punished in the ninth circle of *Inferno* (Satan's pride caused him to revolt against God, and that pride has been regarded by theologians as the root of all other sins). Wrath, on the other hand, would equate to the wrathful in the fifth circle of *Inferno*. Envy and wrath are reserved until the end of *Seven*, where the punishments are more psychological and more complex than the previous, more visceral, punishments.

The parallels between *Seven* and the *Commedia* are not limited to these sins and punishments that follow Dante's concept of "counterpoise." *Seven* closely follows Dante in its atmosphere, its allegorical journey of an everyman figure under the direction of his guide, and its exploration of divine justice (or the lack thereof) in the world.

Except for a few scenes, the atmosphere throughout *Seven* is dark, rainy, and confined: the streets are crowded like the numberless souls waiting on the banks of the river Acheron. In the *Inferno*, referring only to the group of neutrals chasing the banner in the ante-chamber of Hell, the pilgrim Dante remarks, "And after it there came so long a train/Of people, that I ne'er would have believed/That ever Death so many had undone" (*Inf.* 3.55-57). These lines

echo the words of Aeneas to the Sibyl concerning the dead lining the shores of the Styx in *Aeneid* 6 and foreshadow the words of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922), referring to London and, indeed, to the Modern condition:

...Unreal City,  
 Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.  
 Sighs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
 And each man fixed his eyes before his feet. (60-65)

In addition, the "sighs" in Eliot's poem echo those of the "sighs" of the virtuous pagans who suffer sorrow without torment (*Inf.* 4.25-27). The scenes in *Seven* depict a modern American city reminiscent of Eliot's "The Waste Land" and Dante's *Inferno* but whose denizens exist in a living hell, with tenuous hope in this life or in the next. Indeed, if Detective Mills has hope, it is alternately naive and arrogant; if his wife, Tracy Mills, has hope, it derives from her innocence. Detective Sommerset, on the other hand, knows better than to have hope in such a world; although he does not affirm hope himself, he does support Tracy's desire to have her baby.

Detective Sommerset (Morgan Freeman) serves as Detective Mills's Virgil in the film, and Mills (Brad Pitt) plays the part of Dante the pilgrim. Unlike Dante's pilgrim, who finds himself lost in the Dark Woods at the beginning of the *Commedia* and in need of guidance to find his way to God, Detective Mills arrives in his new precinct with the attitude that he knows everything already and has no need for Detective Sommerset's (or anyone else's) guidance. Detective Mills's arrogance (or naivete) prevents him from even knowing that he is in the Dark Woods. On the other hand, Sommerset sees the world for the

dark and futile place that it is, and he tries to share that knowledge with the younger detective. In the end, the truly innocent character, Tracy Mills, who is pregnant, is killed with no remorse on the part of the killer.

*Seven* presents a post-modern view of the world and of human existence: God is dead, or he never existed; this world is the only world, with no afterlife; life, as presented in the film, has its closest parallel to Dante's *Inferno*. Because there is no God, there is no divine order and no sense of eternal justice. "Meaning" must, therefore, be created and imposed on the world or it must derive from a state of innocence. In the case of the former, it is John Doe who functions as God (or God's agent, as he imagines himself to be): he sees himself as an instrument of divine justice whose creation (the perfect series of crimes featuring the seven deadly sins from Dante's *Purgatorio*) is meant to be instructive to the detectives who solve the case (and participate unwittingly in the crime). John Doe also intends for his actions to impress and even create a sense of awe in those who will learn what he has done. John Doe's "counterpoise" for each "sinner" results in death. The destinies of Mills and John Doe become linked in the latter's final crime. John Doe states, "When I said I admired you [Detective Mills], I meant it." John Doe's sin is envy, which leads him to murder Mills' wife and to have her severed head delivered in a package to Mills in the concluding scene, resulting in the revelation of Mills' sin, wrath, which culminates in his execution-style murder of John Doe.

John Doe is motivated by his sense that sin has become "commonplace" and "trivial" in this world, and he believes that he has been "chosen" to free society of its complacency by orchestrating the perfect crimes; he has no pity on his victims because he does not believe them to be "innocent" of their crimes: they are guilty of "sins" and deserving of punishment in his mind (although Tracy does not seem to fit this model). If "envy" is truly his sin, as he tells Detective

Mills, then it is envy not just of Mills's "perfect" life (including Tracy's love for her husband) but also of God, whose prerogative John Doe usurps in acting as his divine instrument. Although the film reinforces the idea that there is no God, there is still love (Tracy's love) and there is still a reason to keep fighting for this world (Somerset's decision to forsake retirement and keep working at the precinct for the greater good). John Doe's use of "counterpoise" in death (even his own) suggests a belief in, or at least a hope for, order. In the end, *Seven* leaves viewers numb with the recognition that the world of the film is no better, and probably worse, than it was at the beginning. Just as John Doe exacted retributive justice in the form of "counterpoise," providing perverted balance to a broken world, Somerset forsakes his retirement to continue working as a detective knowing that the world is not, as Ernest Hemmingway wrote, "a fine place," but that it is "[a place] worth fighting for." If he cannot revert the world to its original order, since any kind of original order is questionable, then perhaps he can impose order, if for only a time and in a limited way. By turning each of the seven sins against the sinner, himself included, John Doe attempts to replicate the symmetry of Dante's system of Divine Justice in his methodical series of murders, though he claims not to have chosen his role but to have "been chosen." If John Doe was "chosen," it remains ambiguous by whom he was chosen.

Dante's infernal vision has remained a popular source of creative adaptation for American authors and filmmakers since its introduction to a broader base of American readers by Longfellow in 1867. The *Commedia* has been adapted for new purposes in such works as *The Dante Club*, *What Dreams May Come*, and *Seven*, to name only a few. These works, influenced by and demonstrative of Dante's vision of sin and its resulting "counterpoise," bring readers or viewers on the same kind of allegorical journey into the darkest places

imaginable, both spiritual and psychological, as Virgil brought the pilgrim Dante, in order to raise questions about the nature of sin and divine justice and to seek order in a dark world.

### Key Words

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *The Dante Club*, *What Dreams May Come*, *Seven*, Dante in American popular culture

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Abstract

Philip Edward Phillips

Dante's *Commedia* remains a popular source of inspiration for popular American writers and filmmakers since being introduced to a broader base of American readers by poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1867. This paper examines some aspects of Dante's influence on the *The Dante Club* (2003), *What Dreams May Come* (1998), and *Seven* (1995), all of which works creatively adapt and reinterpret Dante's vision of sin and its resulting "counterpoise," in the lives and afterlives of their respective characters. The scenarios represented in the novel, *The Dante Club*, and the films, *What Dreams May Come* and *Seven*, recast Dante's allegorical visions in order to address questions concerning justice and order in the postmodern world.

### Key Words

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