

Through a Critical Lens: Traversing Dante's Divine Comedy and Milton's Paradise Lost

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Abstract

This research explores the philosophical intersections between two iconic works of literature, Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy" and John Milton's "Paradise Lost". This comparative study delves into the epic visions and divine narratives presented in these works. Through an examination of both texts, with keen importance on their ideological roots, this paper aims to shed light on the ways in which these two monumental works explore similar themes such as sin, redemption, divine justice, and the human condition. It investigates how Dante and Milton employ poetic language, structure, and characterization to convey their visions, all while spreading their dogmatic views of how one must try living in the world. This research is an attempt to shed light on the enduring relevance of these works, which continue to captivate and inspire readers across the ages. This comparative analysis not only illuminates the thematic parallels between Dante and Milton but also delves into how their astute observations into sin, redemption, and the human condition offer timeless guidance for navigating the complexities of modern life.

Keywords: human condition, critical christian theory, morality, literature and philosophy

Introduction

Parallels between Dante and Milton

Dante Alighieri, one of the most celebrated and influential poets in the history of literature, was born in Florence, Italy, in the year 1265. His life and work are intricately intertwined, with his magnum opus, "*The Divine Comedy*", serving as a profound reflection of his personal experiences, spiritual beliefs, and the socio-political context of his time. Dante's Divine Comedy, is a profound Christian vision of humankind's afterlife and eternal rest. On its most personal level, it draws on Dante's own experience of exile from his native city of

Florence. On its most fundamental level, it may be read as an allegory, taking the form of a journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise.

Born on December 9, 1608 in London during King James I's reign, John Milton lived in a turbulent era of British history filled with political and religious changes. His early life greatly shaped his masterpiece "Paradise Lost," which is considered a classic in English literature. "Paradise Lost" published in 1667, is an epic poem that retells the biblical story of the Fall of Man, drawing from the book of Genesis and other biblical sources. The poem explores profound theological and philosophical themes, including the nature of evil, free will, and theology. These themes can be traced back to Milton's early life, religious upbringing, and the turbulent political climate in which he lived.

COMPARATIVE STUDY

Dante Alighieri and John Milton, despite living in different centuries and writing in distinct cultural contexts, share several commonalities, as well as notable differences, in their works and approaches to poetry. Both these poets have made massive contributions to literature and their unique perspectives on themes such as religion, morality, and human nature were unique views in literature.

One of the most striking similarities between Dante and Milton is their profound engagement with religious and theological themes. Dante's "*The Divine Comedy*" is deeply rooted in Christian theology and draws upon the beliefs and doctrines of his time. His work reflects his devotion to the Catholic faith and serves as an allegorical journey of the soul towards God. Dante's exploration of sin, punishment, and redemption in "*The Divine Comedy*" is emblematic of his Christian worldview, and the poem serves as a spiritual and moral guide for its readers. Similarly, John Milton's "Paradise Lost" is a work of profound religious significance. While Milton's Protestant faith differs from Dante's Catholicism, both poets grapple with theological questions. "Paradise Lost" explores the themes of free will, theodicy, and the consequences of disobedience. Milton's portrayal of Satan as a complex and charismatic figure challenges traditional religious narratives and raises questions about the nature of evil and God's justice.

However, there are also significant differences between Dante and Milton, particularly in their cultural and historical contexts. Dante's "*The Divine Comedy*" is firmly rooted in the Italian medieval tradition, while Milton's "Paradise Lost" reflects the English Renaissance and the influence of classical literature, such as Virgil's "Aeneid." These distinct cultural backgrounds are evident in the structure, language, and literary references of their respective works.

Furthermore, Dante's approach in "*The Divine Comedy*" is more personal and autobiographical, as he positions himself as the protagonist and narrator of the journey through the afterlife. In contrast, Milton's "Paradise Lost" focuses on broader themes and characters, with a particular emphasis on Satan and Adam and Eve, making it less autobiographical and more concerned with the human experience as a whole.

Both poets employ the epic form to delve into the nature of good and evil, the consequences of one's choices or free will, and the human quest for salvation and understanding. Their works

serve as allegorical and philosophical reflections on the human condition. Both Dante and Milton were influential poets in their respective time and place. Dante's contribution to Italian literature and his exploration of theology and morality in *The Divine Comedy* left an indelible mark on the development of literature and the Italian language. Meanwhile, Milton's "*Paradise Lost*" stands as a monumental work in English literature, addressing political, religious, and philosophical questions of his era and leaving a lasting impact on subsequent generations of writers and thinkers.

Critical Christian Theory

Critical Christian theory represents an interdisciplinary approach that examines Christianity through the lens of critical theory, examining the intersection of faith, power dynamics, and social justice. Rooted in the principles of critical theory, Critical Christian theory tries to examine the Christian doctrine, practice, and history within the context of broader social, political, and economic structures. This framework emphasizes a critical examination of traditional interpretations of Christian texts and teachings like Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, challenging dominant narratives and power structures.

"If, therefore, there is any coherent overlap between "Critical Theory" and a historically-informed understanding of early Christianity, it would seem to be this concern for social and economic justice in an unjust and oppressive world." (Hübner 47)

Critical Christian theory emerges as a vital framework that intersects with the principles of social and economic justice within early Christianity. It encompasses a concern for addressing systemic injustices and oppression inherent in societies, reflecting a historical commitment to ethical and moral imperatives. Critical Christian theory thus advocates for justice, equity, and inclusivity in confronting the challenges of our times, reflecting the foundational values preached within early Christian teachings.

The concept of Critical Christian theory in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* In both Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the concept of critical Christian theory plays a significant role in shaping the narratives and themes explored within the works (Mazzotta). This concept encompasses the examination and critique of religious doctrines, beliefs, and practices through a Christian lens. By employing critical Christian theory, both Dante and Milton delve into the theological complexities of their respective works and challenge traditional interpretations of Christianity (Moevs). They question established dogmas and depict the consequences of flawed understanding and misguided actions, particularly in the way the Church became more materialistic.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, critical Christian theory is evident in his exploration of the concept of divine love. Through his journey in Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, Dante examines the nature of love and its role in salvation. He challenges the traditional understanding of divine love as solely merciful and instead presents a more nuanced view that incorporates justice and punishment. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, critical Christian theory is apparent in his reinterpretation of biblical stories and characters. Milton questions the conventional portrayal of God, Satan, and Adam and Eve, reimagining them as complex individuals with motivations and flaws. He also challenges traditional notions of free will and predestination, highlighting the importance of individual choice in the face of temptation. While Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise*

Lost offer thought-provoking reinterpretations of Christian theology, some critics argue that their use of critical Christian theory could be seen as undermining established religious beliefs. By delving into the theological complexities and challenging traditional interpretations, Dante and Milton risk sowing seeds of doubt and confusion among their readers. Their portrayal of divine love, the nature of God, and the concept of free will may be seen as a departure from orthodox Christian teachings, potentially leading to a misinterpretation of fundamental religious principles. Some critics also contend that by questioning established dogmas, Dante and Milton may be perceived as promoting theological skepticism and undermining the authority of the Christian faith. This perspective emphasizes the potential consequences of employing critical Christian theory in literary works, particularly in terms of its impact on religious beliefs and practices. In both Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the concept of critical Christian theory serves as a lens through which we can examine and critique religious doctrines and beliefs. Just as Dante challenges traditional interpretations of Christianity through his exploration of divine love, Milton also questions conventional portrayals of biblical characters and theological concepts. Both authors delve into the complexities of Christian theology, prompting readers to reconsider established dogmas and interpretations.

In a similar fashion to Dante's examination of divine love, Milton's reinterpretation of biblical stories and characters challenges traditional notions of God, Satan, and human nature. By portraying these figures as complex individuals with motivations and flaws, Milton prompts readers to reevaluate their understanding of these central religious narratives. Moreover, both authors touch upon the themes of free will and predestination, emphasizing the significance of individual choice in the face of moral and spiritual dilemmas.

While some critics argue that employing critical Christian theory in literary works may undermine established religious beliefs, it is important to consider the thought-provoking nature of these reinterpretations. Rather than promoting theological skepticism, Dante and Milton's works encourage readers to critically engage with their religious beliefs and contemplate the complexities of Christian theology. Ultimately, the use of critical Christian theory in both the *Divine Comedy* and *Paradise Lost* enriches the exploration of religious themes and sparks meaningful discussions about the nature of faith and living a just life.

Calvin's own description of sin seems as penetrating as contemporary social critics, ethicists, and critical theorists:

"Men . . . are so inclined to self-flattery that they always want, as far as possible, to dissuade the mind from recognizing their sin This, I think, was what led Plato to maintain that we do not sin except through ignorance That might be an apt saying of his if man, in his hypocrisy, could hide his faults so that the conscience was able to escape the judgment of God But since the sinner, his heart failing to discern good from bad, is each time forcibly brought back to the fact of sin, and cannot close his eyes without sometimes having, however reluctantly, to open them, it is wrong to say that he sins through ignorance" (Calvin, *Institutes*, 60)

In the case of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, it delves deeply into the themes of justice and ethics which are central to Dante's journey. It highlights the belief in leading a life guided by principles and righteousness. Through his travels through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven Dante symbolically portrays the souls quest for goodness. The vivid descriptions of justice and redemption emphasize the significance of behavior. According to Dante living a moral life is not just a personal decision but part of the cosmic harmony that aligns individuals with divine order. The *Divine Comedy* serves as a contemplation on how human actions are intertwined with the pursuit of virtuous living.

Conclusion

Due to the tumultuous events of their era, both Dante and Milton aimed to lead people toward a morally virtuous and sin-free existence. "*Paradise Lost*" depicted the fall of humankind and their subsequent salvation through divine grace, serving as a moral guide for its readers. Milton portrays Satan as a symbol of the perils of arrogance, defiance, and power-seeking when morality is compromised. By depicting Adam and Eve's temptation and downfall, Milton emphasized the necessity of good character and the implications of straying from morality. His work encouraged people to withstand temptation, practice personal virtue, and adhere to religious teachings. "*The Divine Comedy*" also depicts the fall of mankind into hell and their subsequent salvation through purgatory, revealing moral lessons and the price for sin. Dante's journey through hell and its various circles is kinda like a slideshow of what the price of sin is. Each circle of hell holds those that committed a particular sin, and punished in the most appropriate way.

In today's society, the teachings of moral values seem to have become less emphasized, both in the educational system and in the community, raising concerns about the understanding and application of the philosophical and metaphysical thoughts and ideas brought by Dante and Milton.

The lack of emphasis on moral values in education can lead to a generation that is less equipped to make ethical decisions and navigate the complexities of the human experience. As a result, individuals may struggle to recognize the consequences of their actions and the importance of seeking redemption and spiritual growth. Without a strong foundation in moral teachings, the understanding of sin and redemption may become overlooked in favor of more immediate, worldly concerns. Furthermore, the declining emphasis on moral values in societal discourse can contribute to a diminished understanding of the significance of spiritual introspection and redemption. Instead of engaging in meaningful discussions about the complexities of human experience and the importance of empathy, forgiveness, and grace, contemporary discourse may lean towards a more judgmental and critical look to dealing with sin. While Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* delve into Christian themes, some critics argue they might present a narrow view of sin. Instead of encouraging spiritual reflection and redemption, these works may focus too much on punishment and fear. This emphasis could lead to readers feeling guilty and scared, rather than inspired by love and compassion. It's important to explore alternative views of sin that embrace forgiveness and grace. This broader perspective offers a

more understanding and compassionate approach to the human quest for spiritual growth and salvation.

In light of these observations, it becomes essential to rekindle the teachings of moral values and the profound insights offered by literary works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. By reintroducing a focus on moral education and fostering discussions that encompass the full spectrum of human experience, we can work towards a more compassionate and empathetic approach to understanding sin, redemption, and the human journey towards spiritual enlightenment and salvation. For both believers and non-believers today who read these books, it's evident how the themes addressed in the works resonate with our world. Concepts like free will, freedom, the political aspects of religion, and the desires to seek knowledge and do good are still highly relevant. Both the works remain a powerful and articulate voice on these issues, urging their readers to contemplate deeply. It calls upon them to embrace the inner paradise that resides within each of us.

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