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The Divine Comedy: A Work of Medieval Mythology

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Greeley, Colorado

THE DIVINE COMEDY: A WORK OF MEDIEVAL MYTHOLOGY

A Capstone
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Fulfillment for Graduation with Honors Distinction and
the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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THE DIVINE COMEDY: A WORK OF MEDIEVAL MYTHOLOGY

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Abstract

Prior to *The Divine Comedy* (1308-1321), ideas about Purgatory were in the early stages of development. Purgatory had loose rituals surrounding its existence and it lacked depiction in written works. Yet in the following centuries, the fear of Purgatory and the practices of penance and indulgences reached a fever pitch, ultimately leading to the Protestant Reformation. Purgatory as a celestial location, and not just the "purgatorial fires" of the Bible, only began to develop in the twelfth century, but its fearful description and imagery in *The Divine Comedy* not only solidified previously nebulous understandings of Purgatory, but also increased anxiety about the afterlife among medieval Christians. Because of this level of influence, this thesis argues that *The Divine Comedy* transcends its typical literary classification as an epic poem and is, instead, a work of medieval Christian mythology. Shifts in Christian ideology and rituals in the centuries following its publication suggest that the *Comedy* established new ideas about Purgatory that were accepted by the Church, illustrating the *Comedy*'s reflection of its culture's values and its reinforcement of those values through the prescription of ritual– two important markers of a mythological work. This thesis examines ecclesiastical documents from the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries to place *The Divine Comedy* within its historical context and assess the degree to which it reflects the medieval Christian culture in which it developed, contributes original images and ideology to its mythological canon, reinforces cultural values through the prescription of ritual, and transcends popular culture.

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Dr. Bovaird-Abbo came into this project a little later, when the topic of my thesis shifted to a more literature-focused project. She is a wealth of information and has not only expanded my understanding of mythology and medieval literature, but also helped me put my best writing forward. Completing an interdisciplinary project requires a lot of moving parts, and her support helped me strike a balanced approach to analyzing the *Comedy* that I think did this project justice.

I would also like to thank Dr. Thomas Smith who helped me brainstorm in the early stages of this project. He provided key guidance on the religious and philosophical aspects of my ideas, which helped me develop a strong thesis. Thanks also to Annie Epperson and Jay Trask who provided lists of resources and gave me new paths to consider.

Many thanks to Loree Crow who has been the backbone of my time at UNC in so many ways, from the first stages of designing my degree to regularly checking in on my thesis progress all the way to the end. Her belief in me and support in carving my own path took my undergraduate experience from something to check off a list on the way to the next stage of my career, to being a truly fulfilling and transformative period of my life. I cannot thank Loree enough for the space she holds for students who want to make the most of their education simply for learning's sake. U-Engage was my home at UNC and Loree is its Dumbledore.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband and daughters for their endless cheering, hugs, coffees, books, and love, all of which were essential in the completion of this thesis. You make it matter.

Contents

Introduction

  The Divine Comedy is a highly researched work of literature. Written between the years 1308 and 1321 by Dante Alighieri, it takes readers on a journey of the Christian afterlife, starting in the bowels of Hell, climbing up the mountain of Purgatory, and finally ascending into the celestial realm of Heaven. As an important part of the Western literary canon, it has been widely read, assigned in literature classrooms, and analyzed by scholars for hundreds of years, amassing a wide body of scholarship about various aspects of the text, from its political themes, its cast of well-known historical figures, its biographical undertones, its poetic aspects, and much more. But the *Comedy* has rarely been discussed as a potential work of mythology.

  There seem to be several reasons the *Comedy* has not yet been considered as a work of mythology. Perhaps the biggest reason is that it is widely accepted in mythological study that the period of mythmaking ended with antiquity. Some consider myths to be the workings of the "primitive" minds of a less developed human race, before science could "better" explain the phenomena of nature and ideas about the universe. Others have simply observed the shift in the types of storytelling in the Middle Ages, which deviated from the mythological in structure, subject matter, and purpose. Rather than focusing on life's bigger questions, the gods, and the design of the universe, medieval stories turned largely legendary, focusing on human concerns and imparting historical narratives.[1] Though there are tales that are written in the mythological form during the Middle Ages, the age of communing with the gods had passed and assertions

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[1] The historicity of legends are often unverified, but like myth, they are typically considered true to the societies in which they develop. A notable exception to the development of myth in the Middle Ages is Norse mythology.

of being inspired by the Muses or by God Himself were no longer accepted at face value. In a world that was more concerned with human affairs and politics, the days of looking up at the sky and wondering about the origins of the universe seemed to have passed. Yet, within the Western literary canon, *The Divine Comedy* stands out in style, its concerns, and its purpose. While it is certainly highly political, it does not take place in the earthly realm and is less concerned with the conquering of nations and interactions between the social classes that fills much of medieval literature. Instead, the *Comedy* is interested in morality and the Christian afterlife, topics that are much more common in myths.

The Divine Comedy has many aspects of myth. It invokes the Muses, which is standard in Homeric myths and those who have imitated the Homeric tradition. It includes gods from pagan mythologies, as well as mythological beasts. And it is written in the form of epic poetry, which was standard in the ancient oral tradition in which mythology developed. It asks questions about the meaning of life and what happens after we die, and it seeks to prescribe a moral code from and for the society in which it developed. Still, *The Divine Comedy* has never been seriously considered as a myth itself. This is surprising, considering that when the *Comedy* is held against popular scholarly definitions of myth, it meets most of the criteria to qualify. If it had been written during the ancient period, I believe it would have readily been accepted as such. Its placement outside of the mythmaking period and the dismissal of Dante's claim that the *Comedy* was divinely inspired seem to have disqualified it from being considered mythological, but I would like to suggest that myths have a cultural relevance, regardless of when they develop and whether or not we accept them as inspired by the gods. Based on its reflection of twelfth- through fourteenth-century Christian ideology and its influence on

official Church doctrine around Purgatory, I will argue that *The Divine Comedy* should be considered as a work of medieval mythology.

Classifying a text as mythology comes with many challenges, not the least of which being that there is no single agreed upon definition of mythology. In modern times, the term "myth" is used in a way that minimizes its importance in previous civilizations and societies, dismissing perceived false narratives as "just a myth." The label is also often interchanged with that of legend, folktale, and fairytale, though each type of narrative has different characteristics, serves different purposes, and is more or less common in different types of cultures throughout history. Differentiating these classifications and separating them from various literary genres is complex and varies widely depending on which field you approach the topic from. Previous mythological study has ranged from the psychological to the literary, and the anthropological to the sociological. While each approach has its benefits and drawbacks, applying any of them to *The Divine Comedy* wholesale limits the ability to understand the text within the framework of its own society, which was not "primitive," homogenous, or insular,[2] nor can the text's relationship to its culture be studied with our own eyes today. In order to understand the role of *The Divine Comedy* within the context of its own society, mythological study has to be adapted to the complex intellectual world of Italy and the Catholic Church in the High Middle Ages.

The Divine Comedy emerged during a period of high intellectual activity in the Latin West. The first universities developed during the eleventh century and along with the re-transmission of Aristotle's works from the Islamic world in the twelfth century

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[2] Ancient civilizations were, of course, never entirely insular but their mythologies often benefited from a certain degree of ideological protection between their culture and outside cultures.

created an environment of urgent philosophical and theological inquiry. Universities were the first schools in the Middle Ages that operated outside of monasteries and chapels, and therefore, were not solely designed for the education of future clergy. This allowed for new ways of analyzing the Bible, combining rhetoric–a sort of inquisition of biblical ideas–and Aristotelian concepts, which Scholastics attempted to integrate in a way that was logically cohesive. The *Comedy* also developed during a period of great reform in the church. Defining and rooting out heresy was an important movement in the church during this period, and there was still a high degree of conflict between papal and state authority, both of which led to the compilation of canon law in an attempt to systematize and enforce the official beliefs of the Western church. This combination of extreme church and intellectual activity led to a very particular flavor of Latin ideology that is characterized by its intensity, internal conflict, vivid imagery (aided by religious art and gothic architecture), and emphasis on morality. This is the culture from which *The Divine Comedy* emerged and which is reflected in the ideology and imagery of the text.

Because high medieval society (roughly 1000-1300 CE) is vastly different from the civilizations and tribes that mythological study is usually conducted upon, typical mythological methods are not ideal for analyzing the *Comedy*; yet, taking a historical approach to mythology is unusual. In universities, mythology is often studied in literature courses despite literary analysis being far from up to the task of tackling the context of mythologies and its many uses and impacts on the societies that uphold mythological narratives. Many of the previous methodologies analyze mythological texts in isolation of themselves. The most popular approach, that of Joseph Campbell, uses psychological methods to analyze the structure of mythological narratives. His approach is comparative

and attempts to illustrate how a common structure among various mythologies is evidence of a collective unconscious. His approach, however, is limited in its incorporation of external sources of evidence, perhaps getting a snapshot of the tribe that upholds a mythology, but is less interested in phenomenological influences and evolution. Similarly, Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralist approach emphasizes the plot of myth, while Carl Jung searched for character archetypes. All of their approaches are similar to literary analysis, which is exclusive in nature.

Sociological, anthropological, and political science methods are more useful when approaching mythology from a broader perspective; however, political science defines mythology without narrative, despite–and I think most mythologists would agree– narrative being one of the most important aspects of mythology. Sociological methods are close in approach to the historical method, but are, by their nature, focused on contemporary study and don't necessarily make extensive use of texts. Similarly, the anthropological approach to mythology has been limited in its use of texts and tends to focus on tribal narratives. Since the subjects of the ancient and medieval world are no longer close at hand, the historical method must rely on what evidence is left. I argue that the historical method, making use of textual and historical evidence, is the most appropriate for approaching the culture of Christianity in the High Middle Ages and is up to the task of analyzing this particular mythology's lasting impact on Roman Catholic ideology.

Despite the popularity of *Inferno* and Dante's equally influential role in developing the landscape of the Christian Hell, I have chosen to analyze *Purgatorio* for this thesis for a couple of reasons. First, though scholars tend to consider Dante the

"inventor of Hell" (and I agree), many of Dante's ideas for the development of Hell were highly influenced by images from Greek and Roman mythology. Though this doesn't diminish *Inferno*'s originality and relevance in the Christian mythological canon, it is less purely Christian in nature than *Purgatorio*. There were no liminal spaces in previous mythologies for Dante to draw upon for the image of Purgatory, so what influence there is to be found for Dante's mountain of Purgatory is likely traced back to other spaces proposed in the Bible. Second, there are no Christian rituals that are tied specifically to ideas of Hell–an important aspect of mythology–whereas Purgatory provokes the acts of confession, penance, and suffrages. For these reasons, I will look at aspects of *Purgatorio* for evidence of mythological influence.

The concept of Purgatory was not a new idea in Dante's time of the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. In his book, *The Birth of Purgatory*, the main source of historical research on Purgatory, Jacques Le Goff traces the development of Purgatory from its ancient influences of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, as well as its nominal beginnings in the Bible and the Jewish *sheol* to, in fact, Dante.[3] Evidence of Purgatory in the Bible is a controversial subject and open to interpretation. The term "Purgatory" itself isn't used in the Bible. It was first used in its Latin form *purgatorium* in the twelfth century and in Middle English as *purgatorie* ca. 1225.[4] Still, there are a few Bible verses that are most often cited as evidence for Purgatory. Matthew states:

> Therefore I say to you: Every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men,
> but the blasphemy of the Spirit shall not be forgiven. And whosoever shall
> speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but he that

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[3] Jacques Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

[4] Le Goff, 154-159; Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "purgatory (n.)," December 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/2584278519.

shall speak against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him neither in this world, nor in the world to come. (Matt. 12:31-32, DRV)

To those who support the idea of Purgatory, this verse suggests two things. First, that there are degrees of sin. While some sins cannot be forgiven, others can be. And second, if some sins can be forgiven, there must be a way for the sinner to participate in the forgiveness process. Additionally, 1 Corinthians states:

For other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid; which is Christ Jesus. Now if any man build upon this foundation, gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble: Every man's work shall be manifest; for the day of the Lord shall declare it, because it shall be revealed in fire; and the fire shall try every man's work, of what sort it is. If any man's work abide, which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work burn, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as by fire. (1 Cor. 3:11-15)[5]

The repetition of fire in this verse serves several purposes. "Shall be revealed in fire" suggests a sort of "trial by fire" where a man's work (the deeds he did in life) will be subject to a fire that burns away veils to reveal the truth so that it can be evaluated. The references to gold and silver allude to the forging process, by which metals are made stronger through the use of fire. And finally, the verse states that a man shall be saved "so as by fire," which is where ideas of "purgatorial fires" that cleanse a man of sin comes from. Though most often cited, these verses leave much to the imagination as to how medieval Christians should understand Purgatory. If they refer to Purgatory, Purgatory seems to be a process more than a location. Dante and other medieval Christians certainly viewed Purgatory in terms of action, yet we can see that the leap from the original mythological text to the Purgatory of the medieval imagination was a large one. These

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[5] See also Luke 16:19-26.

verses lack a sense of place for Purgatory, yet by the thirteenth century, Purgatory had developed into an otherworldly location where sinners would go when they died to act out remediary behaviors to compensate for their sins in life.

From its thin origins, the idea of Purgatory developed over time. Le Goff attributes its origination to, ironically, two Greek theologians: Clement and Origin. From the Greek pagan tradition, Le Goff states, "chastisement inflicted by the gods is not punishment but rather a means of education and salvation." When reading the Old Testament, they took the idea of baptism by fire as God's desire to educate and ultimately viewed it as a positive action from a benevolent God. Clement also distinguished between two categories of punishment in the afterlife–one for those who are redeemable and one for those who are not.[6] Ultimately, Le Goff calls Augustine the "true" Father of Purgatory as he brought the idea of Purgatory to the Latin West, where it took hold (as opposed to the Greek East, where it did not), and wrote of several elements of Purgatory that would be adopted into official ideas of Purgatory later, such as suffrages for the dead, categories of sinners, and temporary punishments for those who were faithful and performed good works on Earth.[7]

Rather than trace a full history of Purgatory, however, I will look at ideas about Purgatory immediately before *The Divine Comedy* to assess beliefs Christians held about it before the *Comedy* introduced the idea of Purgatory as a place, as well as the centuries after the *Comedy* to look for evidence of the texts' influence on official Church ideology. Based on the principles of mythological theory, an environment that held Purgatory as part of its cultural milieu would suggest that the *Comedy* reflected the cultural values of

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[6] Le Goff, 52-54.
[7] Ibid, 61-78.

its time and place. Shifts in the ideology around Purgatory that occurred after the *Comedy*

and align with Dante's imagery would suggest that the *Comedy* was accepted into its

mythological canon. These two principles are the foundation for arguing for *The Divine*

Comedy as a potential work of medieval mythology.

This study will rely on the methods of intellectual history, which makes heavy use

of primary source texts to highlight the evolution of an idea over time. What is unique

about this approach, especially compared to literary analysis, is its emphasis on

contextual sources to evaluate the level of influence the text had within its society. The

intellectual historical approach to a text is interdisciplinary, borrowing practices from

literary analysis, philosophical analysis, and historical contextualization to not only

understand the ideas in the text, but also to attempt to understand why the idea developed

in that particular society at that particular time.[8] Bronislaw Malinowski states, "The

historical consideration of myth…shows that myth, taken as a whole, cannot be sober

dispassionate history, since it is always made *ad hoc* to fulfill a certain sociological

function, to glorify a certain group, or to justify an anomalous status."[9] By looking at a

mythological text within its historical context, the intellectual historian can attempt to

understand the function that the particular narrative served. Then, borrowing from

cultural history–a complementary approach to intellectual history[10]–the intellectual

historian asks how that text reinforced those ideas through the society's acceptance of the

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[8] Donald R. Kelley, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 3. See also, Kelley's article, Donald R. Kelley, "Intellectual History in a Global Age," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 2 (2005): 155–67.

[9] Bronisław Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," in *Anthropology, Folklore, and Myth*, ed. by Robert A. Segal (New York : Garland Publishing, 1996), 125.

[10] Peter E. Gordon, "What Is Intellectual History? A Frankly Partisan Introduction to a Frequently Misunderstood Field," paper for Harvard University [Revised Spring 2012], https://ces.fas.harvard.edu/uploads/files/Reports-Articles/What-is-Intellectual-History-Essay-by-Peter-Gordon.pdf.

validity of the text. Together, these methods allow me to draw *The Divine Comedy* outside of its literary home and look for a greater sense of meaning surrounding the text in the medieval Christian world.

This approach necessarily classifies a work of mythology as a historical artifact, or in other words, a human-made creation. While mythologies are often revered as divinely inspired works, and academically respected as such to its adherents, the historical approach must ask why a mythological narrative emerged within the society that it did with its particular perspectives. As Peter E. Gordon, intellectual historian, states, intellectual history tends to "regard ideas as historically conditioned features of the world which are best understood within some larger context…"[11] Most assuredly, I have a profound respect for the accepted truth of sacred texts within religions. In this study, I am looking to understand why a religious text is considered sacred while other texts are not, and how historians, literary scholars, and philosophers can evaluate the cultural context of a text to properly classify it within the society that reveres it.

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[11] Gordon.

Literature Review

Mythology is a relatively under-studied field. This can be evidenced by Robert A. Segal's admirable, yet short, summary of the leading theories in mythological study since its inception in the 19th century.[12] Mythological study often gets addressed within the confines of literature, grouped with folklore and legends, yet more recent mythologists (to use the term loosely, as they come from other disciplines) are widening the scope of study to assess myth's role as more than storytelling in isolation. Instead, they are beginning to look at myth as an artifact of societal and cultural factors that might offer insight into the beliefs, customs and ideologies of societies with a more integrated lens. Segal's collection, *Myth, Analyzed*, offers seven fields in which myth has been analyzed in the last century: science, philosophy, religion, ritual, psychology, structure, and society.[13]

Important leaders in the field of mythology cannot go unaddressed in any study of mythology. Joseph Campbell (1904-1987), often coined the "Father of Mythology," offers the most extensive research on the subject and is often the first scholar people turn to when discussing aspects of mythology. Campbell takes a psychological approach to the study. He emphasized the theory of a "collective unconscious," which resulted in a mythological story structure that could be discerned in all major myths. His understanding of myth ties closely with Carl Jung's (1875-1961) psychological theory of character archetypes often seen in myths. While these theories are widely accepted in the field and made important leaps in the study of mythology, there is a strong overlap

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[12] Segal, 10-25.
[13] Ibid.

between their theories and that of literary analysis, and I will be respectfully setting them aside for this study in favor of more cultural- and social-based approaches.

Anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942) began to bridge the gap between the psychological approach and the cultural approach. He studied the role of myths within living tribes that he called "primitive" and "savage." Outdated language aside, his ability to observe myth in use provides valuable insights into myth as more than just a popular story or shared idea. His perspective on the importance of myth is stated when he writes, "…myth, in fact, is not an idle rhapsody, not an aimless outpouring of vain imaginings, but a hard-working, extremely important cultural force."[14] Explaining the anthropological role of myth further, he states:

> It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but it is a living reality, believed to have once happened in primeval times, and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. The myth is to the savage what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall, of the Redemption by Christ's Sacrifice on the Cross. As our sacred story lives in our ritual, in our morality, as it governs our faith and controls our conduct, even so does his myth for the savage.[15]

Malinsowki clearly takes a Christian perspective when viewing the tribes he studied, yet he makes an important point that I will expand on in this study. While living in Christian society it can be difficult to view the Bible as a work of mythology; however, the biblical stories he references do, in fact, meet the criteria to qualify as mythology and, I will argue, are the foundation for looking at *The Divine Comedy* as part of the Christian mythological canon. It's also informative to note Malinowski's use of the descriptors "primitive" and "savage" because, while I'm sure his connotations around these words in

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[14] Malinowski, 253.
[15] Ibid, 256.

1927 anthropological studies were different from modern connotations, myths are often

still associated with antiquated and undeveloped cultures and are, therefore, less valued

as subjects worth study. I will address this later on.

I am particularly interested in the sociological view of mythology as a foundation

for a historical approach. Social anthropologist Percy S. Cohen (1928-1999) makes a

clear distinction between theories of myth that are sociological in nature and those that

are not. Under those that are not, he classifies Frazer, Tylor, Jung, and Freud to name a

few. "The chief weakness of these theories," he states, "are that they do not explain why

myth is social in character, and why the possession of certain myths is not only collective

but is significant in marking the identity of a particular social group."[16] According to

Cohen, French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) views myth as part of the

religious system and "expresses in words what ritual expresses in action." Durkheim

believed that both mythology and ritual have a social function of "maintaining and

expressing solidarity."[17] Though Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908-2009) is another important

name in the study of mythology, Cohen admits that, "The trouble with trying to state

Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth is that he has never fully stated it himself."[18] The best

Cohen could offer is that the purpose of myth, according to Lévi-Strauss, is to "mediate

oppositions or contradictions."[19]

In Cohen's summary of the theories of myth, he offers seven main types:

> that which treats myth as a form of explanation and, in particular, a form which
> occurs at a certain stage in the development of a human society and culture; that
> which treats myth as a form of symbolic statement which has the function, not of

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[16] Cohen, 339.
[17] Ibid, 343.
[18] Ibid, 345.
[19] Ibid, 346.

explanation, but of expression as an end in itself, and which reflects a particular type of thought, the mythopoeic; that which treats it as an expression of the unconscious; that which accounts for it in terms of its function in creating and maintaining social solidarity, cohesion, etc.; that which stresses its function in legitimating social institutions and social practices; that which treats it as a form of symbolic statement about social structure, possibly linked with ritual; and, finally, there is the structuralist theory.[20]

For this study, I will use the idea of myth's function in creating and maintaining social cohesion as a foundation upon which to build an intellectual historical approach, with an emphasis on its religious function.

More recently, sociologist and historian, Gérard Bouchard, published a book called *Social Myths and Collective Imaginaries* (2017). In it, he takes a sociological approach to modern myths where he asks questions about how myths come into being, how they gain traction within a society, and finally, how they die out.[21] He proposes a theory about the "collective imaginary" of a society, explaining it as such: "...the concept of the collective imaginary often refers to all the symbols that a society produces and through which its members give meaning to their lives."[22] While this could easily be confused with Campbell's collective unconscious, the important distinction is that the collective imaginary is external and tangible in nature, whereas the collective unconscious is internal and amorphous in nature. The interactions of the collective imaginary can be observed through relational interactions within a society. *Social Myths* argues that myths are an important symbol of society, and also includes symbols. To explain the phenomenon of myth, he proposes eight types of representations that "form the basis for the constitutive relationships of a culture":

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[20] Cohen, 338.
[21] Bouchard, 3.
[22] Ibid, 13.

1. Representations of space: the symbolic appropriation of a space, such as a household or homeland.

2. Representations of time: the delineation of days, weeks, months and seasons.

3. Representations of the social: the assignment of rank or status based on prestige, authority, assets, and power.

4. Representations of the self and others: the basis of an identity dynamic of inclusion and exclusion.

5. Representations of the past: narratives such as history, novels, folk tales, rituals, etc. which feed the collective memory of a society.

6. Representations of the future: collective projects, goals, utopias, dystopias, and sense of shared mission.

7. Representations of the nation or society: provides legitimacy and establishes an allegiance.

8. Representations of the universe, life and death, this world and the hereafter: gives meaning to existence.

Bouchard suggests that all of these representations feed on myths.[23] One particularly compelling argument is that Bouchard's conception of the collective imaginary is both a producer and a product–I will suggest that myth holds the same status.

Though the study of mythology is most well known through the work of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung, who took a psychological approach, pulling from

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[23] Bouchard, 16-18.

anthropological and sociological perspectives allows this area of research to expand to include cultural contextualization. It allows us to ask about the meaning of a mythological text to the community in which it developed, and what purpose it serves in their daily lives. The anthropological and sociological approaches work with immediately observable subjects; however, for this project, I have adapted the perspectives of Malinowski and Bouchard to create a historical approach through which to analyze *The Divine Comedy* and its influence on medieval Christian society.

What is Mythology and How Do We Define It?

Much of the study of mythology is an attempt to define exactly what myth is and how to differentiate it from other types of storytelling–namely folklore, legends, and broader literature. Yet those who study mythology do accept that there is something *more* about mythology, something that transcends literature itself. Myths are often tied into religions, rituals, and ideologies in a way that, say, *The Great Gatsby,* is not. Even legends as entrenched in a culture as the Arthurian legends of the Middle Ages may saturate the popular culture for a time and in a society, yet legends and folklore often do not attempt to answer the larger questions of life, such as where we came from and why we are here. Because of this, they do not ultimately transcend to the level of mythology. Still, the common elements of narrative, characters which may or may not have existed, strong social influence, and staying power make these types of stories difficult to differentiate from one another. Therefore, in order to address *The Divine Comedy* as a potential work of mythology, it is important to offer a working definition of what mythology is, what it is not, and what its characteristics are.

What Mythology is Not

The first important step to defining mythology is defining what mythology is not. Because of the way we use the term "myth" today, there are many misconceptions about what a myth is in the traditional–or at least academic–meaning of the word. The current usage of the word often denotes a commonly accepted misbelief, such as implied with the phrase, "that's just a myth." In our post-Enlightenment world, it has become common practice to dismiss anything that cannot be scientifically proven as "just a myth." Yet

cultural myths, as they are understood in the study of mythology, have a truth to them in that: 1) those who follow them, in many cases, believe them to be factually true, and 2) they are influential in the lives and societies of their adherents so as to make their impacts qualitatively observable. Though the ideas, characters and stories that are espoused by myths cannot always be proven through science or archeological discoveries, they are understood to be true in the same way the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves influence the way we interact with the world, therefore making their impact real and observable.

Mythological stories often depict events, characters and settings that are very unlike our own, which is why there is debate about their factuality. Surely, Zeus does not *actually* live in the sky and smite people with bolts of lightning. It's difficult to believe that Osiris was split into 14 pieces by his brother, Set, and then brought (almost) back together by his wife, Isis. But to those who worshiped these gods, their myths felt real, if not in the literal sense, then in the metaphorical sense. The metaphor often felt so real to the people of these cultures and societies that the line between metaphor and literalness blurred. Karen Armstrong, a modern expert on comparative religions states it this way: "Mythology is an art form that points beyond history to what is timeless in human existence, helping us to get beyond the chaotic flux of random events, and glimpse the core of reality."[24] I would venture to suggests that modern mythologists are unlikely to argue that the thousands of gods that comprise the many mythologies throughout time are rubbing elbows in the ethereal realm, but with a comparative appreciation for the diversity of beliefs throughout history and across cultures, we accept the universal truths

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[24] Karen Armstrong, "What is a Myth?" In *A Short History of Myth* (New York: Canongate, 2005), 7.

that can more effectively be illustrated through narrative, creating an emotional impact on the reader (or listener, as it once was) than a simple listing of ideas, morals and phenomenological justifications.

Problems of factuality become especially sticky among mythologies that are still in use today. It's easier to look at the myths of cultures of previous times or in far-flung corners of the world and see what we might consider discrepancies between reality and story, yet mythologies of our own time and place prefer to be accepted as factual, such as the Tanakh, the Christian Bible, and the Quran. As William G. Doty states, "in the study of religions, especially the study of primitive religions or non-Western religions…there is often a tendency to refer to 'their' myth but 'our' theology or beliefs."[25] No doubt Ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians, Greeks and Romans held their mythologies in as high regard as the Bible is held today; therefore in order to analyze *The Divine Comedy* as a possible work of mythology, it is necessary to take a comparative and detached approach with Christian mythology, which this thesis will attempt to do, despite Christianity's continued prominence in the Western world.

Still another approach is to consider mythology as a commonly-shared ideal, even without tying it to a particular narrative. Through this lens, a common modern myth is that of the "American Dream." While there is no one narrative that illustrates the American Dream to the level of sacredness, it is an ideal image and set of beliefs that are influential in American society and which have an observable impact on our politics and societal structures. This definition of myth often comes from a sociological or political

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[25] Doty, 6.

lens, and while a valid approach, is not typically what mythologists mean when they use the term.

Scholarly Definitions of Mythology

Though it seems the one thing mythologists agree on is that the term itself is nearly impossible to define with satisfaction, thankfully, that hasn't stopped them from attempting to do so. Some academic attempts to define mythology are vague and amount to little more than a quip that does little justice to the complexity of what mythology is and the role it plays in societies and cultures. Others take seriously the gravity of these narratives and what they mean to the people who uphold their value. A few that capture the nuances of mythology as a serious area of cultural study are as follows:

> I propose that to qualify as a myth, a story, which can of course express a conviction, be held tenaciously by adherents. But I leave it open-ended whether the story must in fact be true.[26]

Being held tenaciously by its adherents seems to be an important part of what differentiates myth from literature. As much as a culture might revere a work of literature, in order to be considered mythology, the work must inform the worldview of its observants and have an impact on their day-to-day living. This characteristic is also what connects these narratives to religion and ritual.

Scott Leonard and Michael McClure define myth as such:

> Myths are ancient narratives that attempt to answer the enduring and fundamentally human questions: How did the universe and the world come to be? How did we come to be here? Who are we? What are our proper, necessary, or inescapable roles as we relate to one another and to the world at large? What

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[26] Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 6.

should our values be? How should we behave? How should we not behave? What are the consequences of behaving and not behaving in such ways?[27]

Myth often furthers a set of morals and values that are both descriptive (emerging from the society's already developing ideology) and prescriptive (reinforcing the ideology, as well expanding it).

Doty offers the most comprehensive attempt at defining mythology:

> A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important (3) imaginational (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphoric and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation, (8) the primal foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind's roles and relative statuses within it. Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folklore, historical legend, novella, or prophecy.[28]

An anthropological definition of myth comes from Bronislaw Malinowski, which captures the perspective of myth that he calls "cultural fact." He states:

> Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force, it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom.[29]

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[27] Scott Leonard and Michael McClure, *Myth and Knowing: An Introduction to World Mythology* (Boston: McGraw, 2004), 1.

[28] Doty, 11.

[29] Malinowski, 101.

Finally, I am particularly interested in the sociological definition of myth, which widens its scope to assess the mutual influence of society on myth and myth on society. Bouchard offers:

> Basically, a sociological perspective suggests that we consider myth as a type of collective representation (sometimes beneficial, sometimes harmful), as a vehicle of what I would call a message - that is, of values, beliefs, aspirations, goals, ideals, predispositions, or attitudes.[30]

Together, these definitions capture the essence of the academic understanding of myth and provide a foundation for how we can begin to see *The Divine Comedy* as a medieval myth.

Mythology vs. Epic Poetry

Currently, *The Divine Comedy* is categorized as a work of literature–more specifically as an epic poem. The epic poem was the traditional narrative form until the eighteenth century, when the popularity of the novel significantly increased. For this reason, most mythologies are written in the form of epic poetry. Writers in the Western canon who have attempted to accomplish lofty literary feats the likes of Homer have often modeled this form, such as Virgil, Augustine, Milton, and yes, Dante. By the time of Milton's writing in the seventeenth century, epic poetry was reaching the end of its dominance in the literary tradition, and Milton is considered by many as the last great epic writer.[31] Yet, while most mythology is written in the form of epic poetry, not all epic poetry is considered mythology.

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[30] Bouchard, 23.

[31] Peter S. Hawkins, "Epic," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion* (1st ed.), ed. by Mark Knight (New York: Routledge, 2016), 210.

There are certain identifying characteristics of epic poetry. Epic poems are, of course, written in verse and are of substantial length as compared to lyrical poetry. They are heroic tales that follow the adventures of a single, revered man within a community and often include intermingling with the gods and a trip to the underworld. Epic poems have standard conventions such as beginning *in media res*, epic similes, catalogs of people and places, and the invocation of the muses. Literary theorists also tend to agree that they must be complex and address "serious" matters. Common themes include war, nationalism, empire, and stories of origin.[32] Additionally, prior to Virgil, epics were part of the oral tradition; their oral formulaic theory allowed bards to remember a vast number of names and tales.[33]

Another major shift in the epic form precipitated by Virgil is the creation of the national epic. Hawkins calls this the "politicization" of the epic and suggests that it lasts from Virgil through the Renaissance.[34] Though the idea of a nation is a modern concept, it has been used as a tool for understanding the relationship between some epics and their communities. The national epic is meant to represent a shared self-concept of a particular group, and often includes the origin story of a society. Georg Lukács, an important voice in the theory of the epic, emphasizes that the epic world is homogeneous. He states, "It is traditionally thought that one of the essential characteristics of the epic is the fact that its theme is not a personal destiny but the destiny of a community."[35] This supposition of homogeneity is an important aspect of not only the epic tradition, but also the

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[32] Luke Arnott, "Epic and Genre: Beyond the Boundaries of Media," *Comparative Literature* 68, no. 4 (2016): 368; Hawkins, 202; 210.

[33] Arnott, 357; Hawkins, 205.

[34] Hawkins, 206.

[35] Lukács, 66.

mythological one. Neither the epic nor the myth is meant to speak for the individual, as the novel does–it is meant to speak for the group. Even if most members of the group do not get a voice in the creation of the epic, their acceptance of its ideas allows the epic to be influential and ultimately prescribe the homogeneity it was meant to describe. While mythology shares this attribute, national epics are not necessarily tied to religion or ritual.

There is no dispute that *The Divine Comedy* falls within the category of epic poem. Lukács, in fact, argued that Dante encompassed the best of both the epic and the novel tradition: "Dante—and only Dante—did not have to endow his hero with visible social superiority or with a heroic destiny that co-determined the destiny of the community—because his hero's lived experience was the symbolic unity of human destiny in general."[36] John Freccero also notes that *The Divine Comedy* is the only major epic that is written from the first-person perspective; "In place of the detached third-person narrative that had described and admired the epic heroes as it were from the outside, Dante's poem looks from within."[37] This narrative shift, however, does little to take away from the Pilgrim as a representative of a community. Though the *Comedy* could certainly serve as an Italian (especially Florentine) national epic, I am more interested in the Pilgrim as a representative of the medieval Christian church. The *Comedy*'s connection to religion and ritual suggest that it had more to offer the Christian community than an origin story–it offered morals, a glimpse into the afterlife, and the prescription of rituals to help adherents achieve salvation.

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[36] Lukács, 68-69.

[37] John Freccero, "Dante and the epic of transcendence," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 77.

Characteristics of Mythology

In order to determine whether *The Divine Comedy* meets the criteria to be categorized as a medieval myth, it is necessary to propose a working definition of the term when no definition is agreed upon in the field. An additional challenge is that of taking a so-far unpopular approach to the study of mythology. My working definition will use as a foundation the thoughtful and well-articulated definitions that have preceded, and my list of characteristic criteria for the work to meet will pull from the various fields of study that have already been used to study mythology, adding some that are history specific.

To begin, there are certain aspects of myth that are relatively undisputed and therefore, for the scope of this project, will be presupposed: that they are narratives; that they contain metaphor and symbol; that they include cosmogonies (stories of creation) and/or etiologies (explanations of phenomena); and that they contain supernatural beings, which often intervene in human affairs.[38] *The Divine Comedy* readily meets most of these qualifications at a cursory glance. While the *Comedy* doesn't offer a cosmogony, it does offer etiologies for baptism, penance, and living a Christian life for fear of retribution in the afterlife. *The Divine Comedy* also pulls some of its authority from the Bible and as such, does not need to repeat Judeo-Christian cosmogonies. This analysis will focus on the *Comedy*'s original contributions to Christian ideology.

Characteristics I will look for *The Divine Comedy* to meet are as follows:

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[38] Doty, 11.

Reflects the ideology and morals of its time and place. An important role of mythology is to demonstrate expected behavior and beliefs for the society in which it developed. Prior to written law codes, people within societies needed other ways to impart expectations for the members of the group in order to promote cooperation and unity. A shared system of beliefs promoted connection, fairness, justice, support, ceremony, celebration, hospitality, and community. In mythology, certain characters are known within the society to represent positive behaviors to be emulated, while others represent negative behaviors to be avoided. Without needing to delineate expectations in explicit language, mythological stories would nonetheless impart the morals and belief systems of its society in a way that was clear and left little room for refutation. Bouchard states, "In any society or collectivity, many ideas and propositions are constantly being put forward regarding how it should be defined and governed, the values and ideals it should pursue, the role or vocation it should set for itself, the representations of the past with which it should sustain itself, the heroes it should celebrate, and so on and so forth."[39]

The reflection of a society's ideology and morals is another characteristic that differentiates mythology from literature–while literature might suggest certain behaviors to emulate or avoid, these behaviors are not necessarily expected. When behavior or ideological influence is the goal in a work of literature, it appeals to empathy in the hope of persuading the reader to choose to enact certain ideals. Conversely, mythology often appeals to fear in order to urge followers to behave in specific ways through the implication of supernatural retribution or other forms of punishment. Ideal behaviors and beliefs are not suggested, they are expected.

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[39] Bouchard, 9.

Contributes original images and ideology to its mythological canon. Mythologies are

rarely, if ever, made up of a single story; they are often a web of stories that feature

recurring characters and work together to reinforce societal perspectives. There may be

one or two major stories that are better preserved, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* in

Greek mythology, but there are often also less preserved, sometimes shorter tales that

feature characters from the same pantheon of gods and heroes and reflect similar cultural

ideals. Yet, each of these individual stories contribute new episodes and images to the

greater canon of that society's mythology. This criteria would rule out, for instance,

adaptations. Mythological canons are not made up of the same story told over and over

again. In order to be included in the canon, a tale must contribute something that the

canon did not already possess. Even in instances such as Genesis, which has two versions

included in the Bible, each version is included because each one offers a different

scenario, while both reinforce God as the creator. In the best of circumstances, stories

will add entirely new ideas to the canon while still upholding the overall perspective of

the canon as a whole.

Reinforces beliefs through the prescription of rituals. One of the most important and

defining aspects of mythology that differentiates it from other forms of literature is its

prescription of rituals. Sacrifices to the gods, planting and harvesting rituals, seasonal

celebrations, commemoration of sacred events–these are all examples of common rituals

depicted in mythological texts that have been incorporated into the lives of their

adherents. The rituals prescribed in myths have a couple of main purposes. According to

Cohen, Durkheim views myth as part of the religious system and "expresses in words what ritual expresses in action." Durkheim believed that both mythology and ritual have a social function of "maintaining and expressing solidarity."[40] Throughout history, myth has brought people together through the practice of common rituals. The marking of sacred events and annual celebrations are ways that societies form communities, maintain them, and honor their shared beliefs.

Rituals are also a way of garnering favor from the gods for particular outcomes in the earthly realm. In ancient agricultural societies, rituals for a bountiful harvest were common when societies relied on favorable weather conditions to ensure they would have enough food stores for the coming year. In Ancient Greece and Rome, animal sacrifices to the gods would be expected to gain their support in times of war. "Myth bolsters ritual by giving mere human behavior a real, not to mention divine, origin: do this because the gods did it or do it. Conversely, ritual bolsters myth by turning a mere story into prescribed behavior of the most dutiful kind: do this on pain of anxiety, if not punishment."[41] Ritual in mythology is a way of bridging the gap between the mundane and the spiritual.

Transcends popular culture in the lives of its adherents; it is considered sacred.

While literature can be highly influential on popular culture and other forms of art, it tends to remain relevant to the degree that it reflects and informs social and artistic rhetoric. Literature provides opportunities for analysis, reflection, conversation, and shared language and images, yet it rarely reaches a level of meaning on a wide enough

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[40] Cohen, 343.
[41] Discussing Clyde Kluckhohn's theory of myth, Segal, 18.

scale to impact behaviors or societal structures. Doty tells us that "Culturally important myths, 'big' stories as opposed to purely personal themes, reappear repeatedly within various frameworks of the society's oral and written literature and are represented thematically in rituals and iconography."[42] The attempt to answer life's bigger questions through supernatural means is often a hallmark of mythology, but what is especially important in identifying a work as mythology is that its adherents believe it.

Because of this, mythology often rises to the level of sacredness. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *sacred* as "Set apart for or dedicated to some religious purpose, and hence entitled to veneration or religious respect; made holy by association with a god or other object of worship."[43] With their reflection of societal beliefs, their status as part of a mythological canon and their encouragement of rituals–the three previous characteristics of myth–myths are often the written contribution to a society's religion. Mythological texts bring societies together around shared ideology and they serve as the touchstone of stability for their community. Bouchard states, "A full-fledged myth draws its authority mainly from the fact that it participates in a form of sacredness and thus exists beyond the realm of rationality. This characteristic, which largely exempts it from being called into question and from being 'attacked' by reality, accounts for its predominance, resilience, and longevity."[44] While literature speaks to the beliefs of individuals, mythology speaks to the beliefs of a community.[45]

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[42] Doty, 13.

[43] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "sacred (adj.), sense 3.a," December 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6476499828.

[44] Bouchard, 25.

[45] Lukacs speaks to the role of the novel as focus on the individual in Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A historico-philosophical essay on the forms of great epic literature* (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1971), 66.

Finally, an important idea about mythology that is particularly historical and which I will address throughout this thesis is that mythology not only emerges from a society, but is also reabsorbed into its society to reinforce the ideology that created it. A work of mythology has characteristics that are reflective of its particular culture, and once it is created, through its dissemination either orally or in written form, its repetition and prescription of rituals keeps the myth alive in its community. About the "collective imaginary," which Bouchard defines as "the link [established] between familiar realities such as norms, traditions, narratives…identities…[and] the deepest symbolic structures," he says it has "two overlapping dimensions—it is both producer and product."[46] I believe mythology holds the same status, and I contend that *The Divine Comedy* had such an impact on the medieval Christian world.

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[46] Bouchard, 13 and 20.

Mythological Criteria #1: Reflects the ideology and morals of its time and place.

The first step to assessing *The Divine Comedy* as a potential work of medieval mythology is looking at how the text reflects the ideology and morals of its time and place. Mythologies do not spontaneously appear and only become influential after the fact; they emerge from ideas that are already circulating within a culture or society, eventually reaching a point that stories begin to emerge with these ideas either explicitly or implicitly embedded into its message. Prior to popular literacy, stories were told orally, allowing some flexibility for messages to evolve over time as they were passed down from older generations to younger ones. Oral retelling also allowed messages to solidify as they became more refined and stood the test of time. One possible reason mythologies die out is that mythological cultures' ways of living outgrow the ability of the stories to meet new moral questions as they arise. Once these stories were written down, they lost some of their flexibility, though could still be impacted by translation, interpretation, and meeting the needs of consumers over time.

The Divine Comedy is unique as a potential work of mythology because it was never an oral story, though it adopted aspects of oral tradition, such as rhymed verse, invoking the muses, and pseudo-cataloging (while Dante does not list individuals one after another, his emphasis on naming contemporary Florentine figures mimics the bard's memory for characters). This follows in the Virgilian tradition which, while also a written myth, adopted Homeric oral characteristics. Nevertheless, despite its written form, *The Divine Comedy* extracted and preserved important moral ideologies of its time and place of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Latin Church. While there are many aspects of this time and place preserved in *The Divine Comedy*, for the scope of this thesis, I focus

on the development of the concept of Purgatory, which emerged in the twelfth century but which, as many scholars argue, only became solidified as a celestial location through *The Divine Comedy*.

After Augustine, there was little advancement on the doctrine of Purgatory in the early Middle Ages. Attempts to define the liminal space picked up again in the twelfth century with the rise of Scholasticism. Le Goff attributes this to two major changes: the development of universities and the desire during this period to systematize ideology. He calls the thirteenth century the "century of organization."[47] Dante and *The Divine Comedy* are clear products of this time. Dante seems to have studied informally at the University of Bologna in 1286 and 1287.[48] Though he did not receive a degree, he was highly influenced in the Scholastic tradition through his reading of Thomas Aquinas, a near-contemporary of Dante and to many, the preeminent Scholastic. *The Divine Comedy* is also a highly structured work, which I will discuss in various sections throughout this thesis. However, in order to best assess the immediate environment of the development of Dante's Purgatory, in this section I will analyze ecclesiastical documents that reflect ideas about Purgatory directly before *The Divine Comedy*, namely decrees from the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the Second Council of Lyons (1274).

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Latin Church began a centuries-long endeavor to systematize church doctrine through the first compete compilation of Canon Law as well as a series of ecumenical councils, which resumed a tradition that had, to many, ended with the Second Council of Nicaea in 787. These councils were a part of the Eleventh Century Reform movement (also known as Gregorian Reform),

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[47] Le Goff, 237.

[48] A.N. Wilson, *Dante in Love* (New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 119-120.

which sought to correct certain clerical behaviors and assert papal authority. This push

for reform occurred for two main reasons: the ongoing battle over supreme authority

between church and state, and heresy. Though the Investiture Controversy was settled at

the Concordat of Worms (1122), the Church felt the need to ratify the decision in church

doctrine, which was done at the First Lateran Council in 1123 under Pope Callixtus II.

      The issue of heresy was addressed at the Third and Fourth Lateran Councils,

specifically condemning the Albigensians and Cathars, but also beginning to address

heretical ideas and behaviors for clerics and the larger Christian population. During this

period, the ecumenical councils and their decrees began to represent the Latin Church as

a whole, not solely that of the Church in Rome, the pope, or Italy, but for all Western

European Christians practicing Roman Catholicism. This suggests a desire for uniformity

in the Church as well as the wider Latin Christian community.[49] In the Fourth Lateran

Council, Pope Innocent III did not address Purgatory specifically, but he did issue

decrees that emphasized a growing concern around avoiding sinful behaviors and what to

do when such transgressions occurred, setting the stage for an intermediary afterlife that

would support those who failed to complete the prescribed remedial actions during their

lifetime.

      The Fourth Lateran Council was held in 1215 and was attended by approximately

four hundred bishops and eight hundred abbots, priors, and representatives of the

collegiate churches. It is regarded to be the largest and most influential council of the

period, and established the official practices of Christianity in the West until the Council

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[49] Anne J. Duggan, "Conciliar Law 1123–1215: The Legislation of the Four Lateran Councils," in *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period, 1140-1234: From Gratian to the Decretals of Pope Gregory IX*, ed. by Wilfried Hartmann and Kenneth Pennington (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 318.

of Trent (1545-1563). Largely accepted as having been written by Pope Innocent III himself[50], the list of canons issued at the Fourth Lateran is reported to have been read and accepted in its entirety. Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, addressed issues that would become prominent in *The Divine Comedy*'s *Purgatorio.* It states:

> All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their own (parish) priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed, receiving reverently at least at Easter the sacrament of the Eucharist, unless perchance at the advice of their own priest they may for a good reason abstain for a time from its reception; otherwise they shall be cut off from the Church (excommunicated) during life and deprived in Christian burial during death.[51]

This canon reflects a growing interest in the ritual of confession and how it should be performed during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. *Omnis utriusque sexus* is the first church decree to prescribe a specific frequency for the act of confession. Prior to the Fourth Lateran Council, confession was mostly unregulated and seems to have been performed casually by parishioners. While there are many important aspects of this canon, for the purposes of *The Divine Comedy*, the frequency and timing of confession are most relevant. The purpose of confession is to cleanse oneself of sin before receiving the sacrament, which would most often be done prior to Easter, especially among parishioners who were not associated with a particular parish or may not have regular access to church services to confess more frequently.[52] In the world of the *Comedy*, in

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[50] Duggan, 343.

[51] Canon 21, H. J. Schroeder, *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils: Text, Translation and Commentary* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1937), 259-260.

[52] Rebecca Springer, "Confession in England and the Fourth Lateran Council," in *Thirteenth Century England XVII: Proceedings of the Cambridge Conference*, ed. by Andrew Spencer and Carl Watkins (Boydell & Brewer, 2021), 163, 172-173.

order to enter Purgatory proper, one must have performed the ritual of confession or some other form of penance, lest they get stuck on the beach of ante-Purgatory at the base of the mountain hoping for prayers from their loved ones or waiting out a prescribed time in order to enter. The souls of those who did not or could not perform confession prior to their death were in danger of either spending more time in Purgatory or missing out on the benefits of its cleansing process altogether. The expectation from the Church to perform confession at least once per year would have ensured as many souls as possible had access to Purgatory, as only the most pious and dedicated clerics were likely to ascend to heaven without first spending some time in Purgatory. The *Comedy* itself is set on Easter weekend, beginning in *Inferno* on Good Friday and reaching the peak of Heaven by Easter Sunday. The timing of the Pilgrim's purgation aligns with Pope Innocent III's decree that every Christian confess before taking the Eucharist on Easter, which the Pilgrim performs on the steps leading into the mountain of Purgatory.

At the Second Council of Lyons held by Pope Gregory X in 1274, the first evidence of the acceptance of Purgatory by the Latin Church appears. The declaration states:

> But because of diverse errors introduced by some through ignorance and by others from evil, it (the Church) says and teaches that those who after baptism slip into sin must not be rebaptized, but by true penance attain forgiveness of their sins. Because if they die truly repentant in charity before they have made satisfaction by worthy fruits of penance for (sins) committed and omitted, their souls are cleansed after death by purgatorical or purifying punishments, as Brother John * has explained to us. And to relieve punishments of this kind, the offerings of the living faithful are of advantage to these, namely, the sacrifices of Masses, prayers, alms, and other duties of piety, which have customarily been performed by the faithful for the other faithful according to the regulations of the Church.[53]

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[53] DS 464.

This statement illustrates an elevation in clarity and urgency surrounding sin since the Fourth Lateran Council, as well as the rituals for alleviating it. In the first sentence, the declaration reinforces the importance of penance such as Pope Innocent III urged sixty years prior. However, in addition to this reassertion, the council also added that not doing so would result in the impossibility of being cleansed through "purgatorical and purifying punishment." This decree also introduces the idea that time in Purgatory can be reduced through "sacrifices of Masses, prayers, and alms," also known as suffrages. Both of these ideas are picked up by Dante and included in the organization of *Purgatorio*. Yet this decree, the last official statement by the Church about Purgatory before Dante's time, shows that the Church had not yet made the leap from Purgatory as a process to Purgatory as a place–an important distinction for assessing the influence of the *Comedy* on the ideology of Purgatory. Together, these council decrees leading up to *The Divine Comedy* illustrate a gradual acceptance of the need to cleanse the soul of sins before reaching Heaven.

Though there are many aspects of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Europe that created the environment in which *The Divine Comedy* developed, looking at ecclesiastical documents from the Latin Church allows us to assess which ideals were officially accepted by the Christian world in Dante's time and place. Because several heretical groups had emerged during this period, it is important to differentiate ideology from smaller sects and the larger Christian community. While ideals can differentiate widely between individual Christians, as previously stated, mythology is meant to speak for the group, and in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Western Europe, the Roman Church was the

voice of the Christian world. Additionally, because lay Christians could not read Latin, they relied on the church to disseminate the ideas of the Bible and the doctrinal decrees of the Church and so the ideology outlined in ecumenical councils represented the culminated ideas of Christianity in the High Middle Ages. The decrees of the Fourth Lateran Council and the Second Council of Lyons established the importance of the doctrine of Purgatory and illustrate the value of Purgatory in the time of *The Divine Comedy*.

Mythological Criteria #2: Contributes original images and ideology to its mythological canon.

The second criteria *The Divine Comedy* should meet in order to be considered a work of mythology is that it contribute original images to its mythological canon in the form of episodes, scenarios, characters, settings, symbols, ideas, or the like. Mythologies very rarely exist within a single text by a single source. They almost always exist as a body of many texts pieced together from multiple sources.[54] For instance, in Greek mythology, there are several larger texts, such as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer and the *Theogony* by Hesiod, but in addition to these texts, there are hundreds of smaller stories that contribute to ideas about the pantheon of Greek gods, the values upheld by ancient Greek culture, and the rituals to be performed to appease the gods. While multitudinous, these stories rarely overlap; if they did, their contribution to the canon would be redundant and unnecessary. Each story offers a new episode, a new god or goddess, a new ritual, or some other piece of the larger canonical puzzle. Even in instances where the same story is being told two different ways, such as the two versions of Genesis in the Bible, the variances add richness and room for interpretation to the Christian canon. Therefore, in order to establish that *The Divine Comedy* contributes original images to its mythological canon, we must first establish that it is connected to a mythological canon, and then that it introduces an image that does not already exist within that canon. I argue that the image of Purgatory as a place is the *Comedy*'s contribution to the Christian mythological canon.

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[54] Mythological canons also include songs, images, and other artifacts that contribute to the overall reception and understanding of the mythological world.

Dante makes his intention to contribute to the canon of Christian mythology apparent. The *Comedy* contains motifs, symbols, references, ideals, characters, and allusions from the Bible on every page. Even the first line, "When I had journeyed half of our life's way," is a reference to biblical verse.[55] Dantean and biblical scholar Peter S. Hawkins accepts the *Comedy* as an extension of the Christian canon. He tells us that Dante's incorporation of scripture into a poem is unparalleled–the only other poem that comes close is *Paradise Lost*.[56] Though characters of pagan mythologies are prevalent in the *Comedy*, the emphasis on Christianity's superiority is clear throughout. Hawkins calls this a "fundamental biblical disposition," stating that this disposition is "its claim to be a para-scriptural work capable of being read on four levels, as only the Bible can be read; a *poema sacro* to which both heaven and earth have set their hand; an undertaking whose inspiration is claimed to be the overflow of the Holy Spirit's divine shower, which Dante 'collects' from the Old and New Testaments and in his turn 're-rains'…throughout one hundred cantos of *terza rima*."[57] In other words, Dante believed the *Comedy* to be a divinely-inspired work that expanded on the concepts of the Bible with the purpose of extending ideas of the afterlife that are only alluded to in the Bible. Hawkins adds, "For as the Old Testament is to the New, so are we asked to see the *Commedia* in its relation to the entire biblical tradition."[58] From a mythological perspective, though many figures from the Bible make appearances in the *Comedy*, it is the placement of the Christian God

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[55] See Psalms 90:10.

[56] Peter S. Hawkins, "Resurrecting the Word: Dante and the Bible," *Religion & Literature* 16, no. 3 (1984): 59.

[57] Ibid, 59-60.

[58] Ibid, 62.

as the god figure that most signifies it as part of the Christian canon. There is sufficient overlap from the Bible to tie the *Comedy* to its main mythological source.

Yet, *The Divine Comedy* brings new ideology and rituals to the larger canon, as well as a new image that had not previously existed in any other work of Christian mythology–that of Purgatory as a place. Prior to the *Comedy*, there was no idea of Purgatory as a location in the afterlife. Previous Christian sources suggested that "purgatorial fires" were a process but gave no indication that Purgatory should be considered an otherworldly location. They certainly did not provide details of what such a place would look like. Dante pulls many of his ideas about Hell from Greek and Roman mythology, but a place of in-between was essentially non-existent in previous mythology. With the doctrine of Purgatory emerging in the twelfth century and becoming more prominent in thirteenth-century society, if Dante hoped to write an epic poem that journeyed through the Christian afterlife, a visual representation of Purgatory would need to be envisioned. Dante chose the image of a mountain, and scholars have discussed several reasons why he may have made this choice.

Le Goff suggests that Dante chose the image of the mountain because it represents the logic of Purgatory–the act of purgation is, as he puts it, a climb. Unlike the downward spiral of *Inferno*, which has a wide entryway and can easily be fallen into, Purgatory is meant to require sustained effort. Sinners who hope to gain entry into Heaven must put in the work, and that theme is reinforced throughout *Purgatorio* as the Pilgrim and Virgil squeeze through small openings and move up steep slopes, often bent forward by the effort of the climb as well as the weight of the sin the Pilgrim carries. The mountain, as it rises, also lifts the sinner toward the ultimate goal of *The Divine Comedy*:

Paradiso. In order to reach the celestial realm where Heaven resides, sinners would need to gain the necessary elevation. This works symbolically as well, because as each sin is purged, the sinner is one step and one circle closer to Heaven, both literally and figuratively. Le Goff states, "Dante knew how to give Purgatory its full dimensions because he understood its role as an active intermediary and because he was able to relate its spatial representation to its underlying spiritual logic. He bridged the gap between cosmogony and theology."[59] The mountain is that bridge.

Dante scholar Alison Morgan argues that Dante's use of the mountain is well-rooted in scripture. She suggests that Dante's choice leans on the tradition of Eden and Jerusalem and that the *Comedy*'s mountain is placed on the slopes of the mountain of Earthly Paradise. In Hebrew cosmology, the earth has three parts: *Sheol* (the Hebrew underworld), the earth, and the firmament (heavens).[60] As stated in Isaiah 2:1-4, the earth and the firmament meet at the top of mountains.

> And in the last days the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be prepared on the top of mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills, and all nations shall flow unto it. And many people shall go, and say: Come and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for the law shall come forth from Sion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge the Gentiles, and rebuke many people: and they shall turn their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into sickles: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they be exercised any more to war.

1 Enoch 17:2 also states, "And they brought me to the place of darkness, and to a mountain the point of whose summit reached to heaven." Both verses suggest that the

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[59] Le Goff, 337.

[60] Alison Morgan, *Dante and the Medieval Other World - (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 8)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 160.

bridge between earth and Heaven is on a mountain top, where Earthly Paradise is said to be located. Therefore, while there are no images of Purgatory in the Bible, there is scriptural support for Dante's idea of Purgatory as a mountain, and it is the *Comedy* that makes that connection.

In keeping with the Scholastic tradition, Dante's mountain of Purgatory is well-organized and defined. Each aspect of the mountain serves a symbolic purpose that solidifies its meaning within Christian ideology. After traversing through the bowels of Hell, the Pilgrim and Virgil emerge on the opposite side of the globe where the mountain is positioned diametrically opposite of Jerusalem, which was often viewed as the center of the world in the medieval Christian imagination.[61] They arrive on a beach at the foot of the mountain, yet the Pilgrim seems unable to raise his eyes to take in the full grandeur of the mountain. He looks at the constellations above and at his guide, but Dante does not give the reader a wide-angle view of the mountain.

In Book IV, the Pilgrim beseeches his guide for more information about the journey upward, stating:

> But if it please you, I should willingly
> learn just how far it is we still must journey:
> the slope climbs higher than my eyes can follow."
> And he to me: "This mountain's of such sort
> that climbing it is hardest at the start;
> but as we rise, the slope grows less unkind.
> Therefore, when this slope seems to you so gentle
> that climbing farther up will be as restful
> as traveling downstream by boat, you will
> be where this pathway ends, and there you can
> expect to put your weariness to rest.[62]

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[61] Le Goff, 335.

[62] Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Everyman's Library, 1995), *Purg.*, 4.85-95.

The Pilgrim and the reader then blindly grope their way up the mountain, perhaps as murky in our understanding about the attributes of the mountain as Dante. Readers of the poem are forced to take each leg of the journey, like the Pilgrim, one step at a time.

As the Pilgrim begins his ascent, he receives seven *P*'s on his forehead, each one representing a cardinal sin that must be cleansed before he can leave the mountain. The *P*'s stand for *peccato*, the Italian word for sin. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a rise in the teaching of the Seven Capital Vices, or Seven Deadly Sins. Evagrius of Pontus, a 4th-century Egyptian monk, is the first known writer of a list of sins, known as the "eight evil thoughts." They were later transferred from the Byzantine East into the Latin West by John Cassian in the early 5th century. The idea of the Cardinal Sins captured the Medieval imagination and they certainly captured Dante's.[63] There are seven cornices of Purgatory, each one designed to cleanse the sinner of a particular cardinal sin–the same Cardinal sins punished in *Inferno*, yet able to be purged either because the sinner repented before death, because those on earth prayed to shorten their time in Purgatory, or because they waited out their allotted time in ante-Purgatory, a time decided as "thirty times he spent in his presumptuousness."[64] They are ordered by severity, with the worst sins at the bottom of the mountain and the lighter sins closer to the top, making the journey easier the higher the sinner climbs. Dante's ordering places pride at the bottom, followed by envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. Dante's perception of the cardinal sins is that they are perversions of love in one way or another.

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[63] Mike Aquilina, "Introduction," in *The Seven Deadly Sins: Sayings of the Fathers of the Church*, ed. by Kevin M. Clarke (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 1, 9.
[64] *Purg.*, 3.139-140.

The first three sins–pride, envy, and wrath–are the turning of the love of good into the love of evil. The fourth sin–sloth–is "lax love" or a "slow love." And the final three sins– avarice, gluttony, and lust–are too much love of a good thing, or sins of the flesh.[65] Sins are purged in three ways: through physical punishment, meditation on the sin and its opposing virtue, and prayer.[66] As the Pilgrim completes the act of purgation on each terrace, a *P* is struck from his forehead by the wing of an angel, symbolizing being released from the burden of that sin and allowing the Pilgrim to move to the next circle.

Tying in the biblical purgatorial fires, after all seven sins are purged, the Pilgrim must pass through a wall of flames in order to reach Earthly Paradise. "This is–I think– the way these spirits act / as long as they are burned by fire: this is / the care and this the nourishment with which / one has to heal the final wound of all."[67] Purgatorial fires are at once cleansing as well as strengthening. Dante seems to believe that the traditional "faith and works" still need the support of the purgatorial fires to reach the level of purification required to enter the gates of Heaven. He describes the experience as such: "No sooner was I in that fire than I'd / have thrown myself in molten glass to find / coolness–because those flames were so intense."[68] Passing through the fires requires just as much work and fortitude as performing the acts of penance on the way up the mountain and is the final step to be fully released from one's sins. This inclusion of the purgatorial fires also connects Dante's image of Purgatory to that of the Bible and reinforces the mythological link between the two texts.

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[65] Le Goff, 341-342.
[66] Ibid, 339.
[67] *Purg.*, 25.136-139.
[68] *Purg.*, 27.49-51.

Through *The Divine Comedy*'s "biblical disposition" and ties to scripture, Dante asserts his desire to have the *Comedy* considered as part of the biblical canon. Dante is clearly interested–as were others of the medieval Scholastic tradition–about the details of the Christian afterlife, and where scriptural details are lacking, Dante is so bold as to expand on those details with his own imagination. Drawing Purgatory as a place is something that had not been done in any previous works of Christian mythology, making it an original contribution to the canon. It could be argued that Dante was simply using his artistic creativity when he imagined Purgatory as a place, yet there are two reasons to take Dante's version of Purgatory seriously in the context of mythology: that Dante asserts that he was divinely inspired to write the *Comedy*, in the same way that Homer was influenced by the muses (and dare I suggest, the same way the prophets were spoken to directly by God), and that his idea of Purgatory as a place was accepted not only in the popular medieval imagination, but by the Church as well, which I will expand on further in this thesis. For these reasons, I suggest that Dante's Purgatory meets this criteria of being mythological.

Mythological Criteria #3: Reinforces beliefs through the prescription of rituals.

From a cultural perspective, one of the most important aspects of mythology is its connection to ritual. I would argue, this is also the aspect that most differentiates myth from literature. While literature can be held in high esteem in popular culture, it rarely affects behavior in measurable ways, especially at the societal or cultural level. Mythology, on the other hand, prescribes behaviors that are adopted at a societal level and connect adherents to the ideology of the text. The relationship between myth and ritual has a mutually reinforcing effect–the myth immortalizes the rituals of a culture through recorded narrative, and the recorded narrative gives meaning to the rituals, as well as preserves the articulation of the practice for future generations. Malinoski states, "…the rituals, ceremonies, customs, and social organization contain at times direct references to myth, and they are regarded as the results of mythical event. The cultural fact is a monument in which the myth is embodied, while the myth is believed to be the real cause which has brought about the moral rule, the social grouping, the rite, or the custom."[69] The connection between myth and ritual allows the text to be alive in the daily lives of its adherents, making the intangible tangible.

Looking again at Greek mythology as an example, common rituals in Ancient Greece were animal sacrifice and libations. These rituals are illustrated frequently in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, as well as other Greek myths. From reading these texts, it is clear that the rituals of animal sacrifice and libations were common practices before Homer's writings; they are depicted in the texts without fanfare or explanation, suggesting that the readers of these myths would have been familiar enough with them that they would not

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[69] Malinowski, 108.

need instruction on how to perform the rituals, or for what purpose. Yet, their inclusion in the most important stories of their culture normalized these behaviors and potentially clarified how, why, and with what frequency to practice them. Through the dissemination of the text, ritualistic behaviors are normalized for the culture and often grow to be expected in order to support the ideals of the society. Within the Roman Empire, for example, animal sacrifices were believed to have supported the effort to expand the empire and those who did not perform the act were persecuted as traitors of the state.

The rituals most closely associated with Purgatory, and which are reflected in *Purgatorio*, are those of confession, penance, and suffrages. The purpose of each of these rituals was (and still is, in the Catholic faith) to receive forgiveness for sin and reduce the amount of time a person would spend in Purgatory. All three rituals were practiced regularly and enthusiastically by twelfth- and thirteenth-century Christians. Confession and penance were part of a tripartite ritual that would cleanse the sinner through admission of the transgression to the Christian's personal priest (confession), the assignment and execution of actions meant to treat the sin (penance), and then to receive forgiveness for the sin (contrition). This tripartite ritual, uncoincidentally, aligns with the three-part structure of the *Comedy*: *Inferno* confronts the sins of the soul, *Purgatorio* allows for reparations, and *Paradiso* is the home of those who have been absolved of their sins. Yet, confession and penance during one's life was often not enough to skip Purgatory altogether; therefore suffrages allowed the living to offer prayers for their deceased loved ones to help reduce their time in Purgatory. To analyze the relationship between *The Divine Comedy* and medieval Christian rituals, I will look at how these three rituals are presented in the text.

The first ritual we see illustrated in *Purgatorio* is confession, which Pope

Innocent III addressed at the Fourth Lateran Council. Within the text, confession is best

reflected in the symbolism of the three steps leading onto the mountain of Purgatory.

Dante writes:

> There we approached, and the first step was white
> marble, so polished and so clear that I
> was mirrored there as I appear in life.
> The second step, made out of crumbling rock,
> rough-textured, scorched, with cracks that ran across
> its length and width, was darker than deep purple.
> The third, resting above more massively,
> as flaming red as blood that spurts from veins.[70]

Dante's illustration of confession is one of his many triune symbols throughout

the *Comedy* meant to reflect the holy trinity of God, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but

confession's three-part structure was also well accepted in medieval Christian practice. In

Mandelbaum's notes on his translation of the *Comedy*, he gives a commonly accepted

interpretation of the symbolism of this verse. The first step, made of white marble, is

meant to represent the mirror of self-knowledge. The sinner looks at themself clearly and

accepts the truth of their spiritual crime. This step reflects the Christian ritual of

admitting their sins to their confessor, bringing their sin into the light to be examined.

The broken second step represents the acknowledgment by the sinner that because of

their sins, they are a broken soul in need of repair. They accept their sinful nature and are

humbled by the grace of God to bestow forgiveness. The final step is the color of blood,

reflecting the desire of the sinner to correct their errors, and reminding them of Jesus's

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[70] *Purg.*, 9.94-102.

death on the cross for humanity's sins. At this point, they are ready to move into the stage

of penance, which the characters of *Purgatorio* do as they move out of ante-Purgatory

and onto the mountain of Purgatory proper.[71]

Le Goff's interpretation takes a slightly different approach. He suggests that the

first step is supposed to make the penitent as white as marble, presumably from

embarrassment of their sins; the second step "causes the penitent to turn deep purple with

shame"; and the final step reflects the motivation of the penitent to perform penance

because of the ardor of Christ's love.[72] Regardless of the variations, both of these

interpretations emphasize the ritualistic nature of the steps on the Pilgrim's journey to

forgiveness. Before the Pilgrim is able to begin to perform penance, he must go up the

metaphorical steps that the medieval Christian would need to *literally* perform to be

eligible to proceed with penance and be absolved of their sins.

The second ritual, penance, is the reason for Purgatory's existence. Though

penance could be performed during one's life in the High Middle Ages through the

assignment of prayer, fasting, alms, works, and pilgrimages, it was believed that these

acts would only reduce the time spent in Purgatory, not eliminate it altogether.[73] Still, to

reduce one's time in Purgatory was considered urgent for the medieval Christian;

therefore these rituals were practiced regularly.[74] Aquinas's writings on penance were

especially influential on Christian theology during this period, and on Dante in particular.

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[71] *The Divine Comedy*, 650.
[72] Le Goff, 347.
[73] James B. Gould and Jerry L. Walls, "Recounting the Past: Prayer for the Dead in the Historical Church," in *Understanding Prayer for the Dead: Its Foundation in History and Logic*, 1st ed. (The Lutterworth Press, 2016), 30.
[74] George Corbett, *Dante's Christian Ethics: Purgatory and Its Moral Contexts* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2020), 74.

Aquinas believed that penance served three purposes: "(1) it realigns the soul from a disordered pursuit of earthly goods to God as its ultimate end; (2) it repays the debt for sin; and (3) it frees the soul from all vice and imperfection." These three purposes were equally true for the penances performed in life, as well as in the afterlife.[75]

The act of penance is portrayed throughout *Purgatorio*. As previously stated, each cornice of Purgatory aligns with a particular cardinal sin, and to cleanse each sin, a corresponding act of penance is performed. On the first cornice, that of pride, penitents must carry heavy weights to cure them of their sins. On the second cornice, that of envy, sinners' eyelids are sewn shut. On the third cornice of the wrathful, they are blinded by black smoke. The slothful, on cornice four, have to run endlessly without rest. The fifth cornice houses the avaricious, who are tied to the ground, face down, and must shout examples of poverty and generosity. The gluttonous on cornice six endure extreme hunger and thirst. And, finally, the lustful walk through flames while shouting examples of chastity. When each of these sins is purged, the penitent may rise to the next cornice until they finally reach the top of the mountain, Earthly Paradise, and prepare to enter Heaven. The Pilgrim imitates this process by having 7 *P*'s stamped on his forehead at the bottom of the mountain. Once each act of penance is performed, a *P* is removed through the strike of an angel's wing. The character of Virgil explains the process as such:

> Now we ascended by the sacred stairs,
> but I seemed to be much more light than I
> had been before, along the level terrace.
> At this I asked: "Master, tell me, what heavy
> weight has been lifted from me, so that I,
> in going, notice almost no fatigue?"

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[75] Corbett, 77.

> He answered: "When the *P*'s that still remain
> upon your brow–now almost all are faint–
> have been completely, like this *P*, erased,
> your feet will be so mastered by good will
> that they not only will not feel travail
> but will delight when they are urged uphill."[76]

Here, the Pilgrim's observation of his increasing lightness reflects the lightness of being absolved of one's sins–the burden of its weight being lifted from the soul. Virgil explains to the Pilgrim that they will feel lighter with each subsequent cornice until, when they reach Earthly Paradise, they feel no strain at all. This is the ultimate goal of penance.

For those who were expected to spend an especially long time in Purgatory, loved ones could perform the final ritual I will discuss, which is suffrages. Suffrages were the act of prayer for those who were already deceased in the hopes of decreasing their time in Purgatory. Throughout the Middle Ages, the performance of suffrages was common. Churches often held special times and events specifically for the performance of suffrages outside of regular services. Aquinas was also a leading voice on the theology of suffrages. He stated that prayers could not help those who were in Hell or unbaptized children in Limbo, nor could they help the blessed. They were specifically designed for the salvation of those in Purgatory, emphasizing the unique position Purgatory held in the medieval mind.[77]

Suffrages were an officially accepted ritual by the church at the Second Council of Lyons. Dante's acceptance of the ritual is clear by the sheer number of characters the Pilgrim meets in *Purgatorio* who ask him to carry messages to their loved ones on earth,

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[76] *Purg.*, 12.115-126.
[77] Gould and Walls, 31.

asking them to pray for the reduction of their time in Purgatory.[78] In ante-Purgatory, the

Pilgrim meets Manfred, the grandson of the Empress Constance, who tells him:

> Despite the Church's curse, there is no one
> so lost that the eternal love cannot
> return–as long as hope shows something green.
> But it is true that anyone who dies
> in contumacy of the Holy Church,
> though he repented at the end, must wait
> along this shore for thirty times the span
> he spent in his presumptuousness, unless
> that edict is abridged through fitting prayers.[79]

In this verse, Dante addresses those who did not perform penance while they were

living. Though they repented before death, accepting their fault and sinful nature, they

did not allow themselves enough time to perform works before death. Because of this,

they may not enter Purgatory proper and must wait an allotted time, which can only be

reduced by suffrages since they are not yet able to perform penance themselves.

In Canto XI, Dante takes the rare opportunity to address the reader directly on the

topic of suffrages. He tells us:

> If there they pray on our behalf, what can
> be said and done here on this earth for them
> by those whose wills are rooted in true worth?
> Indeed we should help them to wash away
> the stains they carried from this world, so that,
> made pure and light, they reach the starry wheels.[80]

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[78] Le Goff, 350.
[79] *Purg*., 3.133-141.
[80] *Purg*., 11.25-36.

Dante beseeches the reader to perform the ritual of suffrages more directly than most works of mythology address their own rituals, emphasizing the connection between myth and ritual in the *Comedy*. While rituals in other mythologies are often alluded to or, as with the three steps into Purgatory, symbolized, here Dante explicitly sets the expectation for Christians to perform suffrages, employing the use of guilt for those who do not prioritize the ritual in their regular religious practice. The cultural expectations myths set for their societies are an important aspect of mythology, which Dante clearly does here for the medieval Christian.

As the concept of Purgatory gained traction as a middle realm in the Christian afterlife, rituals surrounding its ideology developed and became more prominent. If forgiveness could be gained for the laity, there would have to be a way to earn forgiveness. While the rituals of confession, penance, and suffrages were not created by Dante, Dante contributed to their spread and practice in a couple of ways. First, by recording and illustrating their practice, he ensured their survival in the minds of the medieval Christian; this is the work of mythology in the practice of ritual. Second, by creating an imaginary representation of the punishments one could expect in the Christian afterlife, he created urgency among medieval Christians to achieve salvation so as to avoid the punishments of Hell and Purgatory. The fear this instilled in Christians would have contributed to the felt need to perform repentance rituals, creating the sense of expectation often enforced by myths. These rituals continue to be performed for the (admittedly short) rest of the Middle Ages, until the Protestant Reformation, and they are still practiced in the Catholic faith today. *Purgatorio* did what all myths do for ritual, which is to record them, explain their ideological purpose, and reinforce them within the

society in which they are practiced. In this way, *The Divine Comedy* also meets this

criteria.

Mythological Criteria #4: Transcends popular culture in the lives of its adherents; it is considered sacred.

The final criteria I will address in analyzing *The Divine Comedy* as a work of mythology is that it transcends popular culture and is considered sacred. While many texts in the Western literary canon are highly circulated, studied, and discussed, myths have a special place within a society that transcends discussion and analysis. Myths are considered sacred by adherents and as such, are looked to to answer questions about life, to provide a sense of meaning and direction, and are often tied to the community's religion. While literature can hold personal value for readers, myths hold communal value. This is apparent in the highly relational quality of myths; they provide connection between members of a community, between the adherent and a higher power, and between the adherent and the text itself. Myths contribute to the sense of identity for the community, mirroring its values, culture, and beliefs in long-lasting ways. Because of this, myths often live on within a community for hundreds, if not thousands, of years, creating a legacy that can be observed historically even after the dissolution of a community. As mentioned previously, Bouchard suggests that the collective imaginary is both a producer and a product, and I suggest that myth holds the same value. We have looked at how *The Divine Comedy* was a product of its time, historically and ideologically, based on Dante's absorption of the societal values and belief systems in High Medieval Christian culture. For this criteria, I will address how the *Comedy* was also a producer and reinforcer of culture, ideology, and religious imagery in the Church following its dissemination. I will also look at the legacy the text still holds today.

Without a doubt, *The Divine Comedy* and Dante himself have had a long and esteemed run in popular culture in the West, though the precipice on which Dante was writing made its legacy a shaky one. In Dante's lifetime, the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and possibly parts of *Paradiso* were already in circulation, and were met with immediate popularity. Much of the *Comedy*'s initial success can be attributed to his use of the vernacular, but the *Comedy*'s ideological aspects soon permeated the religious world of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Italian Studies professor Zygmunt G. Barański writes, "What is striking and unique about the poem's fourteenth- and fifteenth-century readers and listeners is the diversity of their backgrounds and of their social origins. The *Commedia* united preachers and university masters, theologians and artists, courtiers and artisans, princes and prelates, merchants and jurists."[81] Right away, the *Comedy* was uniting various members of the community through shared religious ideas, thanks mostly to Dante's use of the vernacular. Writing in Italian made the *Comedy* more accessible to people from all social classes in a way that the Bible, largely written in Latin in the West, was not. However, the *Comedy* emerged during a period of great social change that cut its initial influence short. Overlapping with the end of Dante's life, Petrarch (1304-1374) began the movement of Humanism, which emphasized a re-emergence of classical ideals and a focus on the self. While humanistic perspectives continued to live alongside religion into the Renaissance, the emphasis on developing one's own personal potential led to a devaluation of Church leadership and dogma. It certainly didn't help that Petrarch himself nurtured a great disdain for Dante's writing and through the popularity of his

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[81] Zygmunt G. Barański, "Early reception (1290-1481)," in *Dante in Context*, ed. By Zygmunt G. Barański and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 522-523.

scathing commentaries on the text, was able to dampen enthusiasm for the *Comedy*.[82]

Dante had a resurgence in the fourteenth century, but only as a supreme Florentine poet,

which is where he stands today.[83] He is still considered a source of Florentine and Italian

national pride. Had Humanism not occurred, it's possible the *Comedy* would have had a

longer mythological life and been able to embed itself more deeply in the Latin Christian

culture, but as history stands, we can only guess at how sacred it might have come to be

considered among adherents in the centuries that followed.

Still, there were those who considered *The Divine Comedy* to be a work of

ideological authority (and some who still do), including Dante himself. Mythologies are

often considered to be divinely inspired. Homer invoked the muses in each of his works–

a tradition that was carried on in the epic tradition, including the *Aeneid* and, later,

Paradise Lost. Each of these poets claimed to be divinely inspired and Dante is no

exception. In a letter written to Cangrande della Sacla, Dante calls the poem a "poemo

sacro," or "sacred poem," which demonstrates Dante's intent to write a sacred work.[84]

Dante also calls the *Comedy* a sacred poem in Canto XXV of *Paradiso*. The possibility

that Dante was, in fact, divinely inspired caused concern in religious circles in the

fourteenth century–so much so that the Florentine chapter of Dominicans banned young

friars from reading the *Comedy* in 1335 for fear that Dante's writing was heretical.

Nevertheless, other religious groups treated the *Comedy* as orthodoxy and preached his

work in sermons and later, in the Dominican *studium*. One Carmelite commentator of the

poem, Guido da Pisa, compared Dante to the prophet Daniel in an attempt to appropriate

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[82] Barański, 530.

[83] Ibid, 535-536.

[84] Amilcare A. Iannucci, "Dante's Theory of Genres and the 'Divina Commedia,'" *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 91 (1973): 1.

the *Comedy* as part of the Carmelite religious ideology.[85] Additionally, over 800

illuminated manuscripts of the *Comedy* survive, which Wilson suggests, gave it a "quasi-

Scriptural status," as "such attention was normally only given to the most pored-over

classical texts, such as the philosophy of Aristotle, or to the Bible itself."[86] Yet, only

three editions of the Comedy were published by the seventeenth century, suggesting that

the influence of the text among readers waned over time, lessening its communal

sacredness.

Where the *Comedy*'s influence did not falter, however, was in the Church. At the

Council of Trent, held between 1545 and 1563, the doctrine of Purgatory was revisited.

The main purpose of the council was to address the Protestant Reformation, when

Christian ideology was being split between those who believed biblical interpretation

should be available to all Christians, while the Church continued to hold that the laity

were not educated enough to interpret scripture for themselves. While Protestants did

away with the ideology of Purgatory and its associated rituals, what would then become

the Catholic Church held tightly to these doctrines. One decree from the Council of Trent

states:

> If any one saith, that, after the grace of Justification has been received, to
> every penitent sinner the guilt is remitted, and the debt of eternal
> punishment is blotted out in such wise, that there remains not any debt of
> temporal punishment to be discharged either in this world, or in the next in
> Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened (to
> him); let him be anathema.[87]

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[85] Barański, 528-532.

[86] Wilson, 317-318.

[87] "Decree on Justification" (Council of Trent, Session 6, January 13, 1547),
https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/the-complete-text.htm, Chapter XVI, Canon XXX.

This decree reaffirms Purgatory as a place. The use of "in" and the capital "P" of

Purgatory suggests that to the Church, purgation was no longer just a process of being

purified by fires, but was an otherworldly location. It also reaffirms that all sinners should

expect to spend at least some time there, as earthly penance would not be enough to erase

all sins. Another decree from the Council of Trent states this even more explicitly:

> Whereas the Catholic Church, instructed by the Holy Ghost, has, from the
> sacred writings and the ancient tradition of the Fathers, taught, in sacred
> councils, and very recently in this ecumenical Synod, that there is a
> Purgatory, and that the souls there detained are helped by the suffrages of
> the faithful, but principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar; the holy
> Synod enjoins on bishops that they diligently endeavour that the sound
> doctrine concerning Purgatory, transmitted by the holy Fathers and sacred
> councils, be believed, maintained, taught, and every where proclaimed by
> the faithful of Christ.[88]

The statement "there is a Purgatory" confirms Purgatory as a place, cementing the

legacy of Dante's ideas about Purgatory into Catholic ideology, even beyond the Middle

Ages. This decree also reinforces the rituals surrounding Purgatory, specifically

suffrages, which has kept the doctrine of Purgatory alive in the practice of Catholics in

the centuries since.

As evidenced by a papal speech given by Pope Benedict XV in 1921, Dante still

has influence on Catholic ideology even in modern times. Given to honor the 600th

anniversary of Dante's death, Pope Benedict stated in his speech, "the Church has special

right to call Alighieri hers."[89] Despite fears of heresy in Dante's own time, both by

religious circles and by Dante himself, Pope Benedict posthumously assures us that the

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[88] "Decree Concerning Purgatory" (Council of Trent, Session 25, December 3-4, 1563), https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/trent/the-complete-text.htm.
[89] Pope Benedict XV, "In Praeclara Summorum: On Dante" (Papal speech, St. Peter's Basilica, April 30, 1921), https://www.papalencyclicals.net/ben15/b15summo.htm, 2.

Catholic Church accepts Dante as a true Catholic, with right beliefs, and even more, that

the Church holds Dante as a symbol of the Church. Further on, he states that the *Comedy*

"deservedly earned the title of Divina," which confirms the acceptance of the *Comedy* as

a divinely inspired work, something the Catholic Church does not do lightly.[90] Even more

clearly, he affirms this idea when he states: "Thus, as he based the whole structure of his

poem on these sound religious principles, no wonder that we find in it a treasure of

Catholic teaching; not only, that is, essence of Christian philosophy and theology, but the

compendium of the divine laws which should govern the constitution and administration

of States…"[91] With this, Pope Benedict confirms the place of *The Divine Comedy* in the

canon of Christian mythology, validating that the text supports the official ideology and

doctrine of the Catholic Church; later in the speech, he suggests that all Christians read

The Divine Comedy as part of their spiritual practice, elevating the reading of the *Comedy*

as a ritual in itself.

Finally, to follow the thread of the development of Purgatory, Pope Benedict has

something to say on this matter as well. He states:

> It is thus that, according to the Divine Revelation, in this poem shines out the
> majesty of God One and Three, the Redemption of the human race operated by
> the Word of God made Man, the supreme loving-kindness and charity of Mary,
> Virgin and Mother, Queen of Heaven, and lastly the glory on high of Angels,
> Saints and men; then the terrible contrast to this, the pains of the impious in Hell;
> then the middle world, so to speak, between Heaven and Hell, Purgatory, the
> Ladder of souls destined after expiation to supreme beatitude."[92]

His use of the word "world" to describe Purgatory clearly accepts Purgatory as a

place, 600 years after *The Divine Comedy*. Through addressing the *Comedy*'s ideology

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[90] Pope Benedict XV, 4.
[91] Ibid, 7.
[92] Ibid, 4.

and imagery, and Dante's continued relevance within the Catholic community, Pope Benedict's speech illuminates the many ways the *Comedy* meets the criteria of mythology.

For this final criteria, looking at *The Divine Comedy* as a sacred text is complicated. On the one hand, its time as a living text within its community was short-lived, which means it had very little time to take hold as a mythological reference among Christians in the Middle Ages. There is evidence of religious groups that did accept Dante's work as divinely inspired and even preached about the *Comedy* in their sermons. It was also a popular text immediately following its dissemination among various social classes. Yet, there is less evidence that the Comedy became a part of a personal religious reading practice among medieval Christians in the same way as the Bible, which is how we tend to experience sacred texts today. Still, considering the rate of literacy before the Protestant Reformation, the traction it did gain among the literate, especially the intellectual class, suggests that it might have been more widely accepted into personal belief systems had it been given more time. That being said, the influence the *Comedy* had on the intellectual class afforded it a unique impact on Christian ideology, which was then disseminated into medieval Christian culture in a way that the laity may not have even been aware of. The idea of Purgatory as a place developed into official doctrine and has become an integral part of the ideology of the Catholic Church ever since. For this reason, I argue that *The Divine Comedy* holds sacred status within the Latin Christian mythological canon.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have aimed to analyze *The Divine Comedy* through a new

categorical lens–that of mythology. Currently, the *Comedy* is understood academically as

an epic poem and a work of literature, yet to analyze the text through a purely literary

lens minimizes the important contributions Dante made to Christian ideology and

Catholic Church doctrine. Because Dante's popularity has waxed and waned in the

Western canon throughout the centuries, the *Comedy* has not been taken seriously as an

artifact of High Medieval Latin culture, instead being assessed for its political value,

heralded or devalued over Dante's love for Beatrice, or fetishized for its grotesque

images of Hell, which have been appropriated in today's popular culture. The temporal

distance between our times and that of Dante can make it too easy to write off the

Comedy as the work of an outdated worldview, the realm to which most other

mythologies have been relegated, but it's important to remember that for Dante and for

his fellow thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Christians, the fear and urgency of

confronting the afterlife burdened by Cardinal sins was real in their daily experience;

Dante is simply the one who captured it on the page, writing for the society he lived in

what they could not write–at least not as articulately–for themselves. Mythology, by its

nature, speaks for the group, and in this instance, Dante was the voice for the High

Medieval Christian perspective.

Throughout this thesis, I have suggested that mythology is both a product of its

culture and a producer of culture. On the one hand, mythology absorbs the perspectives

and ideas of the culture in which it develops, and then, as it is disseminated back into its

culture, it reinforces those perspectives and ideas, solidifying them as part of the shared

identity of the community. I have offered four main criteria through which to assess a text

as mythology with intellectual historical methods: that mythology reflects the ideology and morals of its time and place, that it contributes original images to its mythological canon, that it reinforces beliefs through the prescription of rituals, and that it transcends popular culture and is considered sacred. I believe *The Divine Comedy* meets all four of these criteria and should be recategorized as a work of medieval mythology in order to give it the consideration it is due as a historical and cultural artifact of the medieval Latin Church.

As seen in the canons of the ecumenical councils in the eleventh through sixteenth centuries, *The Divine Comedy* had a profound influence on the doctrine of Purgatory, suggesting that Dante's contributions to Christian ideas about the afterlife had permeated the medieval mind, whether or not the *Comedy* was being directly implicated in those changes. As shown, the canons from the Fourth Lateran Council have very little to say about Purgatory, but began to emphasize the ritual of confession, which would be picked up by Dante and symbolized in *Purgatorio*. The Second Council of Lyons addressed "purgatorical or purifying punishments" but had not yet made the leap to Purgatory as a place. In *Purgatorio*, Dante created the original image of Purgatory as a mountain, which gave it a visual representation and created urgency among medieval Christians to avoid prolonging the punishments described therein. He also immortalized the rituals surrounding Purgatory–confession, penance, and suffrages–which are still practiced in the Catholic faith today. And finally, the Council of Trent, the first ecumenical council held after the dissemination of *The Divine Comedy*, shows that Purgatory had been accepted as a celestial location in the afterlife, suggesting that Dante's vision of Purgatory had been fully accepted by the Church, the official decision-making body

regarding Christian ideology in the Middle Ages and beyond. Pope Benedict XV's speech in 1921 illustrates how the Church itself has accepted Dante's influence on their ideology, and how he has come to be a symbol of right Christian belief in the Catholic faith. As this suggests, an important part of seeing a text as a work of mythology is not that academics see it as a work of mythology based on contentious definitions of what that entails, but that the community itself accepts it as part of their culture, and I argue that the evidence suggests that the Catholic Church has done that with *The Divine Comedy*.

Giving *The Divine Comedy* its proper place within history and its culture allows us to begin to look at other narratives outside of the ancient period as having a greater place within societies than works classified as literature tend to hold. Far from being simple tales, mythologies are an important piece of the puzzle in defining a cultural identity, which is something our post-modern world generally suffers without. Religious affiliation has dwindled in the United States in recent centuries and with that trend, the sense of meaning and purpose communities used to find in mythological texts has become a gaping hole in our daily lives, indicating that mythology is far from irrelevant to today's societies. Where will we look to find the answers to life's big questions if we don't have mythologies to turn to? Or perhaps an even more necessary question is, what stories are we already telling ourselves about our culture that could we lean into to provide guidance, meaning, and a sense of morality when mythologies of the past struggle to keep up with modern-day challenges? If texts such as *The Divine Comedy*, which have previously been viewed as "mere" literature, can be accepted into a culture's mythological canon (where their degree of influence suggests it appropriate) current

narratives could be taken more seriously as a guiding force for those who find meaning in them. In making room for new mythologies, rituals around current narratives could be accepted as relevant and we could find room for new ways of interacting with the stories we tell ourselves about our cultures today. Relegating the idea of mythology to an ancient past invalidates the very human need to use story to understand ourselves and give us hope for a better future, both in this life and the next.

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