



## Research Paper

### The Importance and Characterization of Pope Nicholas III as a Monster

While reading Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, translated by Robert Pinsky, in high school, I found the story of Pope Nicholas III to be the most interesting, but the least analyzed in class. The analysis of the characterization of the Pope as a monster in this research paper delves into the context of Dante's infamous epic poem and how this may have affected the characterization. The following question initiated this paper: How does Dante characterize Pope Nicholas III as a monster and for what reasoning? The question requires this paper to analyze the context, definition of sin, punishment of the Pope and importance of other characters to fully understand the importance of the Pope to the story. Subsequent to further research, we can conclude that context played a major role in Dante's characterization of the Pope as a monster. This is because he wanted to criticize the church because a monster to Dante is one who sins, like the Pope. In addition, though, Pope Nicholas III is also a vehicle for Dante to criticize Pope Boniface VIII, who had not died yet. This paper is structured around the main themes of inversion, irony, and the role of Pope Boniface VIII.

Before analyzing the punishment and characterization of the pope, the context must be explained to fully understand Dante's point of view while he wrote the *Inferno*. Firstly, it is important to decipher the difference between Dante the author and Dante the character. Dante the author is strongly influenced based on his political affiliations, versus Dante the character who is on the journey not for political meaning, but rather for spiritual meaning. Dante the author was heavily involved with politics in Florence as a member of the leadership of the White Guelphs, who were in power at the time. The Black Guelphs were highly loyal to the Papacy, and in 1301, conflict arose between the Whites and the Blacks. Pope Boniface VIII, the leader at the time, "instigated a partisan settlement which allowed the Blacks to exile the White leadership, of whom Dante was one" (Wetherbee 2001). Dante never returned and held a strong grudge towards the papacy and the organized church. Before Dante's exile, though, Pope Nicholas III was the leader of the Catholic church. According to Claire Suddath of Time Magazine, "Nicholas III distributed principalities in the Papal States among members of his family, essentially giving them land and political power" (Suddath 2010). This sin is known as simony, but more specifically it is called nepotism after the Italian word for nephew (nipote) and is defined as "the granting of privileges or the showing of favoritism to members of one's family" (Fowle 28). The third pouch of the eighth circle of hell in the *Inferno* is devoted to those who conducted simony, which is based on Simon Magus, who "tried to buy the apostles' power of bestowing the Holy Spirit" (Parker and Parker 38). Dante views those who follow in Simon Magus' footsteps as "wretched [and] rapacious ... or gold and silver" (Alighieri and Pinsky 1996, lines 2-5). In all, the main aspects of the context that will affect Dante's portrayal of Pope Nicholas III are the Pope's acts of simony and Dante's exile, caused by Pope Boniface.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the theme of inversion not only applies to both the church and Pope Nicholas III's punishment, but it also defines sin in the eyes of Dante, therefore determining the basis for Pope Nicholas III's monstrosity. Primarily, the theme of inversion, allows Dante to define sin and monstrosity through the importance of religion. In Kenelm Foster's work *The Two Dantes, and Other Studies*, he explicitly mentions that "the ethic of the *Inferno* is implicitly religious" (Foster 1977, 48) and therefore the basis of punishment in hell is oriented around religion. Through Foster's interpretation, sin is what influences Dante the most when characterizing others as monsters. Sin to Dante is a sort of evil in which religion, devotion, and goodness to God are taken away, such as Foster suggests where "evil, for Dante, is in essence the will to destroy or degrade that goodness" (Foster 1977, 48). According to medieval researcher Alixe Bovey, in medieval literature, "[m]onsters were often used to define boundaries and to express a distinction between morality and sin ... This tactic was used to demonize perceived enemies of Christendom" (Bovey 2015, paragraph 11). Through this perception of sin as monstrous, Dante critiques the church and implies that it is indeed inverted through depicting the Pope as a monster. Dante critiques the relationship between the church and the state, signifying that the church has overstepped its bounds, where the church's "usurpation of the duties of the state becomes his focus in *Inferno* 19" (Parker and Parker 2013). Furthermore, Ronald Herzman and William Stephany depict why Dante feels so strongly about the inversion of the church: "this inversion of matter and spirit culminates in Dante's reference [...] to the channels of grace and God's presence, perverted by the simoniac popes in their thirst for wealth" where "their corruption, consequently, deprives mankind of the most important means of achieving harmony on earth" (Herzman and Stephany 1978, 40). Through Canto XIX, Dante defines sin by illustrating the importance of religion and the inversion of the church through the punishment of Pope Nicholas III, but what is the exact punishment of Pope Nicholas III and how does it apply to inversion?

Overall, the punishment Pope Nicholas III receives is inverted because it combines humor and savagery to comment on the church as a whole. There are two main components to the punishment that are influenced by the theme of inversion: the body positioning and the fire on the feet of the Pope. As Dante approaches the Pope, he notices the position of the pope where "from the mouth of [the pit] projected the feet of a sinner and his legs as far as the calf, and the rest was within" (Alighieri and Pinsky 1996, lines 22-23). The position of the Pope could signify several things, primarily, though, it represents the inverted church, as illustrated earlier. This visual representation is meant to give the reader a graphic cue about how the Pope and church have inverted ideals. In addition, the actual sin of simony comes into play because as Pope Nicholas III stole from the church, he felt he was above everyone else, but now he is below them, as he is in hell and because he is flipped upside down and underground. Through these two interpretations of the Pope's positioning, Dante's use of contrapasso, a punishment directly representative of the sin, depicts the Pope as a monster for contradicting religion. The word contrapasso in itself has to do with the inverse, where those in Dante's hell receive punishments equal to the sin committed. Secondly, Dante punishes Pope Nicholas III by having fire strike the bottom of his feet while in the pit. This is obviously a form of torturous punishment, but when analyze more deeply, it is actually based on the events of Pentecost, but inverted. As Herzman and Stephany suggest, "the Spirit in flames on the heads of the first Apostles is recalled in the flame on the feet of these modern upside-down apostles" (Herzman and Stephany 1978, 40). This punishment recognizes how the Pope went against religious morality of giving hope to the people and therefore must pay for his actions, which Dante views as monstrous. Both the inverted body and the fire on the feet of the Pope aid Dante in criticizing both the Pope and the church through characterizing the Pope as a monster.

In addition to inversion, irony is also very prevalent throughout the *Inferno* as it characterizes Pope Nicholas III as monstrous because the Pope actualized Dante's hatred for the church and its lack of morals. Overall, in the eyes of Dante, it is ironic that a pope was the one to make the church bad. There are two methods to analyze the ironic punishment of the Pope: through the pit and the fire. Irony is used through how the pope is being held in a pit to criticize the Pope's time as the leader of the Catholic church, making him seem useless to religion as a whole. Dante illustrates what he first sees when entering the eighth circle of hell, "I saw the livid stone [...] full of apertures [...] all equal in their width, and circular each. Nor ample less nor larger they appear'd [...] those framed to hold the pure baptismal streams" (Alighieri and Pinsky 1996, lines 16-19). Dante already depicts the irony of the Pope's punishment as he is stuck in an item that is heavily utilized in the church: a baptismal basin. It is ironic because baptisms are meant to be a way to adopt someone into the church, but now the Pope is paying for his wrongdoings by using the basin the opposite way and is being almost shunned from the church. This punishment depicts the Pope as monstrous because he misused such a holy item and is now being punished in it, as Dante suggests through his punishments that committing any sin is worth calling anyone a monster. Secondly, Dante uses irony in his punishment through the fire on the feet of the Pope, specifically the size of the fire and the reasoning for the punishment. As Dante depicts the eighth circle, he notices that there are flames much larger than the others, which caused him to notice the Pope's "limb quivering [which] expressed his pang" (Alighieri and Pinsky 1996, lines 46-47). Dante has the Pope receive such large flames on his feet mainly to attract attention to him, as that was the way Dante, the character in the epic poem, found him in the circle. Conducting acts of simony must be done on a muted scale as it is a "failure of leadership" (Herzman and Stephany 1978, 40). The large flames ironically attract attention to the Pope's punishment as he was supposed to be more inconspicuous. In addition, the play on the Pentecost is illustrated in the views of Herzman and Stephany as the Pope has "refused all of these apostolic first-fruits, and so the fire is on his feet, not on his head, and is a fire of punishment, not zeal" (Herzman and Stephany 1978, 41). Through this explanation, Dante utilizes the fire to truly how his true hatred towards both the Pope and the church, rather than just to show his devotion to God. Possibly, his devotion to God is represented through his hatred of the Pope and the church. As William Reade states, "[w]e must bear in mind that the sinners there are enduring both punishment and purification" (Reade 360). The purification is that of Dante, where he is purifying himself from the church through punishing those in charge of it, like Pope Nicholas III. His devotion to God is illustrated through punishing those who truly committed sins. This is an interesting interpretation because Dante is not only defending himself after breaking a baptismal pit, but also defending his criticism of the church by illustrating his devotion to God. Dante's use of irony to punish Pope Nicholas III characterizes him as a monster, but through this characterization, he punishes the church as a whole.

Although Pope Nicholas III is the only Pope explicitly spoken of in the *Inferno*, Dante actually criticizes Pope Boniface through the portrayal of Pope Nicholas as a monster. Primarily, though, Dante uses Pope Nicholas III to predict that Pope Boniface would be in this circle of Hell soon. According to Deborah and Mark Parker, "Dante manages to skewer two clerics with one quip [...] from our surprise at a pope expecting another pope and from Dante's clever manipulation of time to predict Boniface's future damnation" (Parker and Parker 2013). Dante's clever use of another pope to criticize Boniface illustrates the monstrosity of both popes, but also the corrupt nature of the church as Dante predicts the line of succession will always be corrupted. For Dante, sin illustrates monstrosity, but it is even more serious when a member of the church causes it, especially one who supported Dante's political rivals. Furthermore, Nicholas is in the story because, as Boniface had yet to die, Dante wanted to critique him through Nicholas's characterization as a monster, as Wallace Fowle explains: "Dante is less interested in attacking Nicholas than he is in attacking Boniface, who reigned from 1294 to 1303" (Fowle 1981, 128). This new perspective on the importance of Pope Nicholas as a vehicle to critique Boniface opens up the discussion about why so much effort went into his punishment.

The answer to how Pope Nicholas relates to Boniface lies in the fact that Dante wanted to embarrass Nicholas, and through that he could embarrass Boniface and the church and defend himself. The embarrassment of Nicholas comes in his ironic and inverted punishment, as outlined above, and also "that Nicholas III, no son of God, is unable to prophesy is clear in his misunderstandings about the coming of his successor, Boniface VIII" (Herzman and Stephany 1978, 41). Mistaking Dante for Boniface further illustrates the confusion and inversion of the church, and according to Herzman and Stephany, depicts Nicholas as a monster because he isn't able to prophesy, even though he was the leader of the church. Another perspective of Nicholas' embarrassment is his loss of dignity in that the actual basin the Pope is held in could be interpreted as his purse (Fowle 128). It is a truly embarrassing punishment that Nicholas faces in which he eternally lies headfirst in the very object that caused him to go to hell. Finally, Dante uses the punishment of the Pope to defend himself after being publicly embarrassed twice. The first came, according to Fowle, during a baptism when "a boy was caught in one of the holes, and in order to release him, Dante had to break part of the stone" (Fowle 1981, 127). Through this interpretation, Dante actually uses the punishment of Pope Nicholas in the pit similar to those used in baptisms to "exonerate himself and set the record straight" (Fowle 1981, 127). Furthermore, Dante wanted to defend himself after being exiled by the Black Guelphs, Dante's enemies (Parker and Parker 2013). Due to his exile after Boniface supported his enemies, Dante felt it was necessary to punish Boniface through Nicholas's mistaking of him for Boniface. Through this method, Dante is able to both criticize Boniface and defend himself. In all, Dante does continue to characterize Nicholas as a monster due to his sinful nature, but he also uses Nicholas to criticize Pope Boniface and the church, while also defending his own actions.

Dante's *Inferno* is known as a cultural and political commentary aimed at the Catholic church, but upon further research, it is also a way for Dante to explain his hatred for the church, the papacy, and the Black Guelphs, and was a way for him to defend his own actions. Through the themes of inversion and irony, the conclusion that can be drawn is that context played a major role in Dante's portrayal of Pope Nicholas III as a monster. The Pope is seen as a monster in the eyes of Dante for committing acts of simony, but the role of Nicholas does not stop there. Nicholas acts as a vehicle for Dante to criticize both Pope Boniface and the organized church as a whole, and through this, he could defend his actions against the church. Overall, Pope Nicholas III's monstrosity and Dante's criticism of the church is explained through the pope's punishment. Therefore, the interaction with Pope Nicholas III is a microcosm of Dante's overall hatred for the church.

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### **Reflection:**

Overall, I found that my original research paper was successful in that it analyzed all aspects of Pope Nicholas III's punishment and that it brought in a new viewpoint of the role of Pope Boniface. Therefore, I found it extremely difficult to add more information to my paper. I did find sections to expand on, though. Specifically, I added additional information about the difference between Dante the author and Dante the character in the epic poem. This was an important distinction to make as it can become fairly confusing to readers of this paper which version of Dante I am speaking about. In addition, I added several sentences analyzing the loss of dignity of both Pope Nicholas and Pope Boniface. I recalled that I was originally going to add this section to my first research paper, but ran out of space to do so, so I am happy that I am now able to incorporate it. Finally, I added more detail about how Dante defines sin in his epic poem because I realized that I only mentioned it originally, but did not explain it. Overall, I am very happy with this new version of my paper as I closed any confusing loopholes and added necessary details to an already detailed and well thought out paper.