

Divine Allegories and Earthly Realities: Exploring Symbolism in Dante's 'the Divine Comedy' for Insights into International Environmental Law

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Abstract

This research paper delves into uncovering the metaphorical and allegorical layers within Dante Alighieri's 'The Divine Comedy' and their potential applicability to modern environmental law and ethics. Analysing Dante's odyssey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven as a figurative portrayal of human behavior and ethical repercussions, this paper investigates how his masterpiece provides valuable perspectives for environmental jurisprudence and ethics. By connecting Dante's work to contemporary concerns, it explores the convergence of law and morality within the sphere of environmental conservation. The aim is to demonstrate how the allegorical elements in 'The Divine Comedy' shed light on the ethical dimensions of environmental protection and offer insights into the interplay between law and moral principles in today's environmental context.

I. Introduction

Dante Alighieri's 'Divine Comedy' is a masterpiece of Italian and World literature, composed in the fourteenth century. This epic poem is renowned for its intricate allegorical narrative, rich symbolism, and profound exploration of themes that resonate through the ages. Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, guided by the poet Virgil and his beloved Beatrice, is a profound exploration of human nature, morality, and the divine.¹ It delves into complex issues such as sin, redemption, divine justice, and the human condition. The work's significance extends far beyond its historical context, offering timeless insights into the human experience and the quest for spiritual truth. In recent decades, the concept of international environmental law has gained increasing prominence in our interconnected and environmentally conscious world. This body of law comprises a complex web of agreements, conventions, treaties, and principles that collectively aim to address the global environmental challenges that transcend national borders. These challenges include climate change, biodiversity loss, habitat destruction, pollution, and resource depletion. International environmental law

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¹ A. Pagano and M. Dalena, 'Dante's 'Inferno' is a journey to hell and back' *National Geographic*, available at <http://tinyurl.com/yc8nt497>, 2022 (last visited 10 February 2024).

recognizes the need for concerted global efforts to safeguard our planet and its ecosystems for current and future generations. The growing importance of international environmental law is underscored by the urgent need to tackle worldwide environmental crises. Climate change, in particular, poses an existential threat, demanding coordinated and equitable action from nations across the globe. International agreements such as the Paris Agreement and the Convention on Biological Diversity exemplify the collective resolve to mitigate these challenges. Environmental justice, sustainable development, and the equitable distribution of environmental resources are key tenets of this evolving legal framework. This research paper explores the intriguing parallels between Dante's 'Divine Comedy' and international environmental law. By connecting a timeless work of literature with contemporary global concerns, we aim to shed fresh light on both subjects and inspire a holistic approach to addressing environmental challenges. In doing so, we hope to emphasize the enduring relevance of Dante's literary masterpiece and the pressing need to tackle environmental issues through international cooperation and legal frameworks. This manuscript is an attempt to explore and elucidate the intriguing parallels that exist between Dante Alighieri's 'Divine Comedy' and the realm of international environmental law. By examining these parallels, we aim to illuminate unique insights into both subjects and showcase their shared relevance, despite belonging to different realms - literary and legal.

This comparative approach seeks to establish connections between the moral, ethical, and legal principles outlined in 'Divine Comedy' and the contemporary principles and challenges of international environmental law. To highlight the practical application of international environmental law, we will illustrate how the principles of environmental justice, sustainability, and accountability are upheld or tested in real-world situations. A distinctive aspect of our analysis is the fusion of literary analysis and legal scholarship. We aim to present Dante's work as a source of inspiration for addressing contemporary environmental challenges and emphasize its relevance within the legal and ethical framework of international environmental law. Moreover, we will consider the ethical and moral dimensions inherent in both Dante's work and international environmental law. This approach will offer a comprehensive understanding of the interconnectedness of these fields and inspire a holistic perspective on environmental issues, including the moral imperative and ethical considerations in environmental justice and sustainability.

II. Dante's 'Divine Comedy' and Environmental Themes

Dante Alighieri's 'Divine Comedy' is a timeless epic poem that comprises of three interconnected parts: '*Inferno*', '*Purgatorio*', and '*Paradiso*', each of which forms a distinct stage in Dante's (the protagonist and poet of this epic) spiritual journey.

Inferno: In the first part, '*Inferno*', Dante embarks on a descent into Hell,

guided by the Roman poet Virgil. He explores the nine concentric circles of Hell, each dedicated to different sins. As he ventures deeper, the severity of punishments intensifies. Notable sinners include historical figures and contemporary political foes. The journey ultimately leads to the frozen lake at the core of Hell, where Satan resides as a three-faced monster.²

Purgatorio: In the second part, '*Purgatorio*', Dante ascends a mountain representing a place for souls to undergo purification before ascending to Heaven. Souls in Purgatory are genuinely remorseful and seek redemption. Dante encounters souls striving to ascend, and his journey serves as a symbol of spiritual growth and redemption.³

Paradiso: The final part, '*Paradiso*', witnesses Dante ascending through celestial spheres representing different virtues. In each sphere, he meets saints, angels, and blessed souls who reside there, radiating divine knowledge and love. Dante's journey through Paradise results in a profound spiritual awakening, deepening his understanding of God's love and the divine order of the universe. The culmination of the poem takes place in the Empyrean, where Dante experiences the Beatific Vision - a direct encounter with God.⁴

Dante's '*Divine Comedy*' is a treasure trove of environmental and ethical themes, even though it predates modern environmental discourse. Several key themes stand out:

Sin and Environmental Harm: The concept of sin in '*Inferno*' can be likened to environmental harm. Just as different sins in Hell warrant different punishments, environmental injustices often lead to varying consequences.⁵ The severity of punishment in Hell corresponds to the gravity of the sin, mirroring the disproportionate impacts of environmental harm on marginalized communities.

Redemption and Justice: In '*Purgatorio*', the souls' quest for redemption mirrors the objectives of international environmental law in rectifying environmental wrongs and achieving environmental justice. The parallel between the Purgatorial journey and the aspiration to cleanse oneself of environmental burdens underscores the pursuit of justice in both contexts.

Paradiso and Environmental Ideals: Dante's vision of Paradise in '*Paradiso*' represents an ideal state of environmental justice. It envisions a world where individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, have equitable access to a clean and healthy environment.⁶ This resonates with the ultimate goal of environmental

² D. Manganiello, 'Dante according to Eliot', in Id ed, *T.S. Eliot and Dante* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, London, 1989), 1-16.

³ D. Alighieri, 'The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Volume 2: Purgatorio' available at <http://tinyurl.com/cxayyxr4> (last visited 10 February 2024). The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri Volume 2 (last visited October 29, 2023).

⁴ 'The Divine Comedy, vol. 3 (Paradiso) (English trans.)|Online Library of Liberty' available at <http://tinyurl.com/mr2dskj9> (last visited 10 February 2024).

⁵ 'The Effects of Sin On Humanity's Moral Disposition In Dante's Inferno - Free Essay Example' Edubirdie available at <http://tinyurl.com/yc8vefsu> (last visited 10 February 2024).

⁶ P. Gagliardi et al eds, *Protecting Nature, Saving Creation* (Palgrave Macmillan US, New

justice: to create a society where all enjoy equal access to environmental resources and benefits.

Moral Responsibility: Throughout the entire journey, Dante grapples with questions of morality and ethics. His encounters with various souls and divine beings prompt reflections on individual and collective moral responsibility.⁷ These ethical considerations are directly relevant to discussions about environmental policies and resource allocation in international environmental law.

Dante's 'Divine Comedy', while a work of literary fiction, transcends its narrative to offer profound insights into human nature, morality, and spirituality. It provides an allegorical framework that resonates with contemporary concepts of environmental justice and ethics, underlining the enduring relevance of this classic work in addressing modern global environmental challenges.

III. Parallels with Environmental Concepts

Dante Alighieri's 'Divine Comedy' resonates with contemporary environmental concepts, forging striking parallels that transcend the centuries. His exploration of themes such as moral responsibility for environmental degradation, the consequences of environmental harm, and the quest for redemption and justice aligns with modern environmental concerns. Here, we delve into these parallels, supported by examples and specific passages from the poem. Dante's delves into the concept of moral responsibility for one's actions, mirroring today's ethical discussions surrounding environmental degradation. In Dante's vision of Hell, sinners face punishments befitting their transgressions. These punishments are reflective of their moral responsibility, akin to how contemporary environmental ethics emphasize individual and collective responsibility for environmental harm.

For instance, in the seventh circle of Hell, Dante encounters the 'Violent against Nature'. These sinners abused their natural environment and are now subjected to torment in a burning desert. The vivid imagery of this punishment underscores the consequences of violating the natural order. This parallel can be seen in today's world, where individuals, industries, and nations face growing scrutiny for their contributions to environmental degradation, such as deforestation or pollution. Dante's portrayal of Hell and its varying degrees of punishment finds a contemporary echo in the consequences of environmental harm. Just as different sins in Hell warrant different torments, environmental injustices disproportionately impact marginalized communities. In both cases, there is an inherent imbalance in the consequences of wrongdoings.

Consider Dante's depiction of the ninth circle of Hell, where the sinners guilty of treachery suffer in the frozen lake, likened to the punishing realities faced by

York, 2013).

⁷ 'Moral Responsibility In Dante's Canto V, The Inferno|123 Help Me', available at <http://tinyurl.com/yaek3fz> (last visited 10 February 2024).

communities afflicted by climate change.⁸ Marginalized populations, often the least responsible for environmental harm, bear the brunt of environmental consequences, aligning with Dante's representation of unequal punishments in Hell. Dante's '*Purgatorio*' presents a metaphorical journey of souls seeking redemption and cleansing, a quest that parallels the aspirations of individuals and communities affected by environmental injustices. These communities aspire to cleanse themselves of the burdens imposed by pollution, resource exploitation, and other environmental harms, much like the souls seeking purification in Purgatory.

In the poem, the theme of redemption and justice is vividly exemplified through Dante's encounter with the penitent souls, who diligently work toward their purification.⁹ This mirrors the efforts of environmental activists and communities worldwide who strive for environmental justice, seeking to right past wrongs and create a more equitable and sustainable future.

In summary, Dante's '*Divine Comedy*' beautifully parallels contemporary environmental concepts. His exploration of moral responsibility for environmental degradation, the consequences of environmental harm, and the quest for redemption and justice mirrors the ethical and environmental challenges we face today. Dante's timeless insights serve as a poignant reminder of the significance of addressing environmental issues with ethics, justice, and responsibility, transcending the boundaries of time and literature.

1. Analysing Dante's '*Inferno*' and Its Parallels with Environmental Harm

Dante's vivid depiction of sin and its consequences in '*Inferno*' serves as a powerful allegory that resonates with the concepts of environmental harm, responsibility, and liability in international environmental law. In Dante's Hell, each sin corresponds to a specific punishment, mirroring the idea that environmental degradation results in real-world consequences.

For instance, the sinners in Dante's '*Violent against Nature*' face the torment of a burning desert. Their punishment reflects the consequences of harming the natural environment, underscoring the concept of moral and legal responsibility. This parallel extends to contemporary environmental sins, where individuals, industries, and nations engage in actions that damage the environment, such as deforestation, pollution, or habitat destruction.

In international environmental law, the principle of environmental responsibility is a critical aspect. It establishes that those who cause environmental harm should bear the responsibility for their actions. An example of this is the case of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. BP, the company responsible for the spill,

⁸ 'Dante's *Inferno* Canto 32: Summary & Quotes', available at <http://tinyurl.com/6ajtd4ht> (last visited 10 February 2024).

⁹ G. Corbett ed, '*Penance and Dante's Purgatory*', in *Dante's Christian Ethics: Purgatory and Its Moral Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 105-203.

faced extensive legal liabilities and cleanup costs, showcasing how international environmental law holds polluters accountable for their actions. This aligns with Dante's portrayal of Hell, where sinners face proportional consequences for their transgressions.

2. Aligning Dante's Purgatorial Journey with Environmental Redemption

Dante's Purgatorial journey, as depicted in '*Purgatorio*' is a metaphor for the quest for redemption, which closely aligns with the objectives of international environmental law in rectifying environmental wrongs and achieving environmental justice. The souls in Purgatory are genuinely remorseful and actively seek purification, much like the collective aspiration for environmental redemption.

In the modern context, this pursuit of redemption is evident in international efforts to address environmental wrongs. For instance, initiatives to restore degraded ecosystems, such as reforestation programs or habitat restoration projects, exemplify society's commitment to making amends for past environmental transgressions. In international environmental law, reparations and compensation mechanisms are established to rectify environmental harm, emphasizing the pursuit of environmental justice and the need for accountability.

Legal cases, such as those involving indigenous communities seeking restitution for land and resource exploitation, reflect this alignment. These communities strive to restore environmental and social balance, echoing the theme of redemption within Dante's work. The pursuit of environmental justice is deeply embedded in international environmental law, aiming to right past wrongs and achieve equity in the distribution of environmental benefits.

3. *Paradiso* and Environmental Ideals

Dante's *Paradiso* envisions an ideal state of being, which closely parallels the aspirations of international environmental law. The ideals within Dante's vision include equitable access to a clean and healthy environment, the pursuit of global sustainability, and the alignment of this vision with the goals of environmental justice and global environmental protection.

International environmental law shares these ideals. It envisions a world where all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, have equal access to a clean and healthy environment. The principle of environmental justice within international law emphasizes the importance of ensuring that marginalized communities are not disproportionately burdened by environmental degradation. Legal frameworks seek to promote equitable access to environmental resources and benefits. Real-world examples of international initiatives and legal frameworks that strive to achieve these environmental ideals include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by the United Nations. These goals emphasize the importance of sustainable environmental practices, access to clean water and sanitation, and

the eradication of poverty and inequality. The Paris Agreement, with its focus on limiting global warming and promoting climate resilience, also reflects the ideals presented in Dante's *'Paradiso'*.

Dante underscores the significance of addressing environmental harm, pursuing redemption and justice, and striving for a world where equitable access to a clean and healthy environment is achieved. These parallels highlight the enduring relevance of Dante's literary masterpiece and its insights into addressing modern global environmental challenges.

IV. Contemporary Relevance and Challenges

Contemporary environmental challenges, including climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution, pose significant threats to our planet and have profound implications for international environmental law. These challenges transcend borders, making it imperative for nations to collaborate effectively in addressing them. Dante's timeless themes offer valuable insights and guidance for tackling these pressing issues. Dante's concept of moral responsibility and consequences in *'Inferno'* is particularly pertinent to climate change. Just as the sinners in Hell face consequences commensurate with their sins, nations that disproportionately contribute to climate change bear greater moral and legal responsibility. Dante's work underscores the need for a fair distribution of the burden of addressing climate change, aligning with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in international environmental law. Dante's themes of redemption and justice in *'Purgatorio'* mirror efforts to rectify biodiversity loss. International initiatives, like the Convention on Biological Diversity, aim to restore ecological balance and achieve environmental justice. This reflects Dante's call for redemption, as society seeks to make amends for its environmental transgressions and protect Earth's biodiversity. The consequences of environmental harm portrayed in *'Inferno'* draw parallels with modern pollution issues. As Dante's sinners face proportional punishments, industries, and nations must bear liability for the pollution they cause. Lessons from Dante's work emphasize the importance of holding polluters accountable in international environmental law.

While international environmental law has made significant strides, there are persistent gaps and challenges that hinder the achievement of environmental justice and sustainability. Dante's work offers inspiration for potential legal reforms and policy recommendations to address these issues. Dante's exploration of sin and consequence parallels the disproportionate impacts of environmental harm on marginalized communities. In international environmental law, achieving equity in the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens remains a challenge. Legal reforms inspired by Dante's call for fairness could include stronger mechanisms for ensuring that the environmental consequences of actions do not unfairly fall on vulnerable populations. In Dante's journey, sinners face their consequences,

highlighting the importance of accountability. International environmental law often lacks robust enforcement mechanisms. Drawing from Dante's themes, legal reforms might involve stronger international bodies and monitoring systems to ensure compliance with environmental agreements and regulations.

Dante's *Inferno* embodies the precautionary principle, which advocates taking preventive action when faced with potential harm. International environmental law could adopt a more proactive approach by enhancing the role of this principle. Policymakers can strengthen international agreements and treaties to encourage nations to take preventive measures to avoid environmental harm. His vision of an ideal state in *Paradiso* emphasizes equitable access to a clean and healthy environment. International environmental law must prioritize inclusivity and equity in decision-making processes. Legal reforms can promote the involvement of marginalized communities in environmental policymaking and ensure their interests are represented. In summary, Dante's themes provide valuable insights and guidance for addressing contemporary environmental challenges. By drawing parallels and learning from the moral and ethical lessons embedded in his work, international environmental law can take steps to rectify its gaps and challenges. These potential legal reforms and policy recommendations inspired by Dante's literary masterpiece can contribute to a more just and sustainable global environmental future.

V. Conclusion

The parallels between Dante's 'Divine Comedy' and international environmental law are both striking and profound. In Dante's work, we find echoes of modern environmental concepts, such as moral responsibility for environmental degradation, the consequences of environmental harm, the quest for redemption and justice, and the pursuit of environmental ideals. These parallels highlight the enduring relevance of a 14th century literary masterpiece to the contemporary challenges of global environmental protection. The significance of these parallels extends to both the study of literature and the practice of international environmental law. In literature, it demonstrates the timelessness of Dante's themes and their ability to shed light on pressing contemporary issues. It underscores the capacity of literary works to inform and inspire discussions on ethics, morality, and environmental justice. In the realm of international environmental law, these parallels offer a fresh perspective on addressing global environmental challenges. By drawing inspiration from Dante's allegorical journey, legal scholars and policymakers can explore novel approaches to promote equity, sustainability, and accountability. Dante's work encourages us to recognize that environmental protection transcends mere legal frameworks; it is inherently a moral and ethical imperative that should inform the decisions and actions of nations and individuals. These parallels have broader implications for advancing environmental justice and sustainability on a global

scale. They underscore the importance of fairness, accountability, and collective responsibility in addressing environmental issues. By aligning with the principles and objectives of international environmental law, we can strive for a world where all individuals, regardless of their backgrounds, have equal access to a clean and healthy environment. In conclusion, recognizing and leveraging these parallels is of paramount importance. The ethical and moral lessons from Dante's work can guide us in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. By adopting a holistic perspective that encompasses ethics, justice, and accountability, we can pave the way for a more sustainable and just world.

We must heed the call to action by acknowledging the intertwined relationship between literature, ethics, and international environmental law. This recognition can serve as a powerful tool in shaping policies, initiatives, and practices that better protect our environment and ensure a sustainable future for generations to come. The relationship between literature, ethics, and international environmental law remains a rich area for further research and exploration. Future research directions may delve deeper into the nuanced intersections of these fields, investigating how other literary works can inform and inspire environmental ethics and legal practices. Additionally, the efficacy of ethical principles derived from literature in shaping environmental policy and promoting justice could be a focal point of inquiry. Ultimately, the exploration of this interdisciplinary relationship offers a wealth of opportunities for advancing the global environmental agenda and ensuring a harmonious coexistence with our planet.