

Home / Lifestyle / Art Culture / Why Dante, 700 years later, is still a hell of a journey

## ART CULTURE

# Why Dante, 700 years later, is still a hell of a journey

See how The Divine Comedy's ideas of hell, demons and the afterlife continue to shape our imagination.

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Visions of hell have long been shaped by Dante, as in *The Third Circle*, by the 16th century Flemish painter Johannes Stradanus.

Close your eyes and think of hell. It doesn't matter if you're not Christian and have never read the Bible. Chances are you're imagining an actual place. A medieval-era underworld. Rotting, flaming, red. Full of writhing bodies, pain and punishment. It's not pretty – it's not supposed to be. But if there's really an afterlife, then Dante Alighieri, who died 700 years ago, is probably out there thinking, "Mission accomplished".

The Italian bureaucrat, philosopher and poet finished his three-part epic, *The Divine Comedy*, just a year before he died in 1321. It follows a pilgrim's journey through hell, purgatory and heaven, weaving in tales of the damned and saved people he meets along the way. His imagining of the netherworld – deadly sins, circles of hell, inventive punishments that echo the crimes – highlight our own moral failings as individuals and societies.

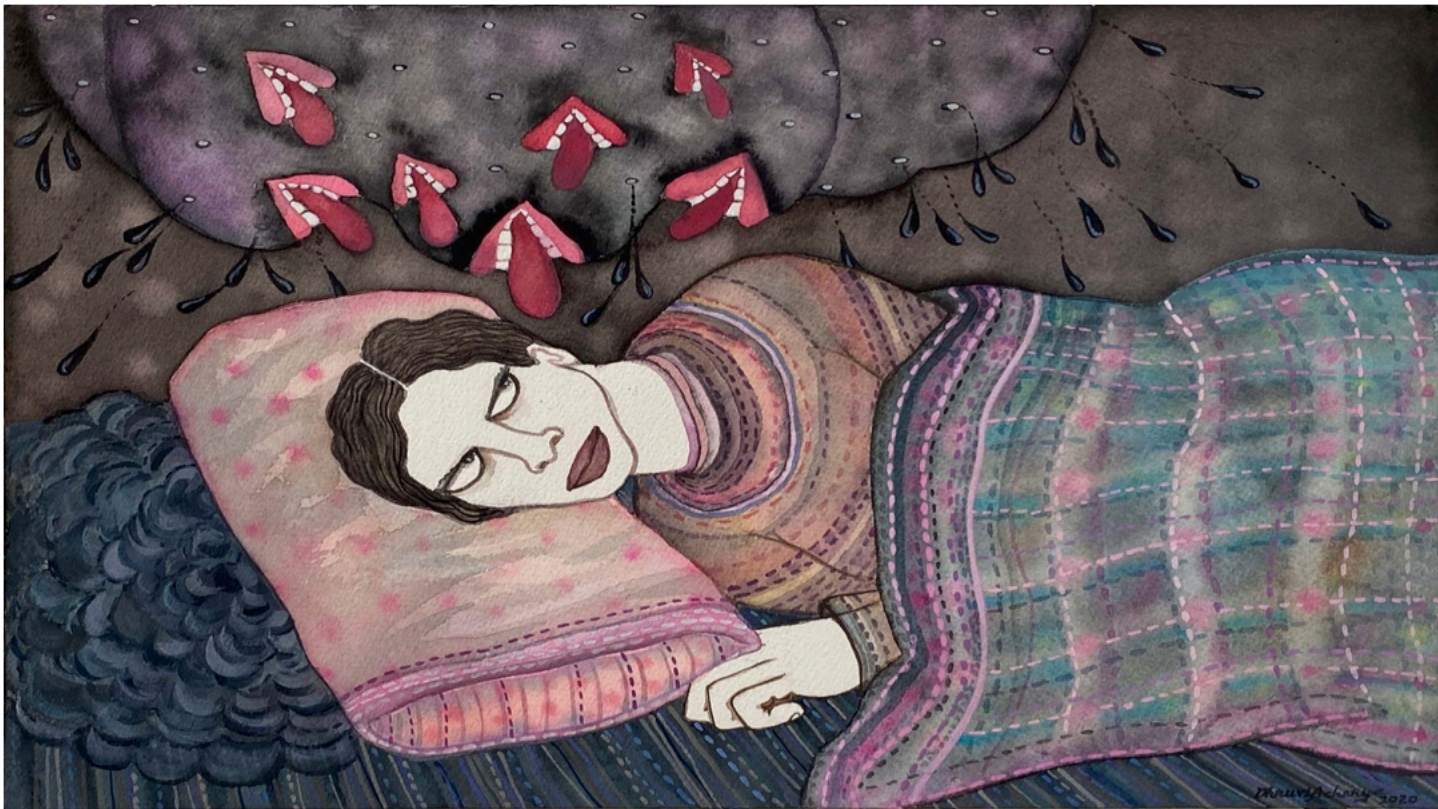
They show up in the paintings of Botticelli and Dali, in Rodin's sculptures, TS Eliot's poems, Neil Gaiman's comics, video games, episodes of *The Sopranos* and *How I Met Your Mother*, even an album by the trash-metal band Sepultura.



The 2010 video game *Dante's Inferno* sets epic battle scenes in the medieval idea of hell.

The poem's influences are so wide and far-ranging that three American universities have collaborated on a website to keep track of them all. Since 2006, Dante Today has been archiving every present-day reference to the poem, through "sightings" and "citings". They're pretty thorough, even adding a hot-sauce brand called 10th Circle to their archive last month.

Italy is marking the anniversary of Dante's death with events all year long. The first of these is only a mouse-click away. The Uffizi Gallery in Florence is virtually displaying 88 rarely seen drawings by the 16th-century artist Federico Zuccari inspired by *The Divine Comedy*. Among them is a drawing of Lucifer as a three-headed monster, and depictions of cruel but fitting punishments – like backbreaking construction work for the sin of pride. The show is "organised as a journey in stages that allows viewers to admire them... in their entirety and in detail" says the Uffizi on its website.



Inner demons emerge in Lockdown Day 5, a 2020 work by contemporary Indian artist Dhruvi Acharya. (Image courtesy Dhruvi Acharya)

Browse , and you'll realise how much has quietly changed. In the modern world, hell is no longer a faraway place to be dealt with after death. We talk of our own private hells and personal demons. Our villains — the system, society, circumstance.

Our understanding of divine wrath and retribution shifted as science began to offer practical explanations for disasters and disease, says artist Dhruvi Acharya. Her own works feature women processing personal purgatories — internal screams match external chaos, the real world is overwhelming enough to render an afterlife unnecessary.

“As humans learnt about natural systems and understood cycles of cause and effect, they figured out that the ‘hell’ of disease, death and extreme poverty have explanations rooted in science and in unequal human societies based on greed, power and selfishness,” she says. “We humans now do not think of blaming any God for our fate, knowing very well it is often humanity’s own doing, fair or unfair, intentional or not.”

So while Dante's poem shaped how we understand human behaviour, modern works point out that we're already reaping what we've sown. On TV, when Lucifer relocates from hell to Los Angeles, running a nightclub and consulting for the local police, viewers happily suspend disbelief. In Dante 2021, a three-part BBC audio show about how the poet still steers the present, the idea looms large that hell, heaven and purgatory are right here on earth, often within us.

Meanwhile, Dante's legacy could get an interesting update later this year. The poet was accused of corruption in 1301, fined 5,000 florins, banished from Florence and permanently banned from public office. In 1302, when he failed to appear in court, he was condemned to death in absentia (he died of malaria 20 years later in Ravenna). Seven centuries on, one of Dante's descendants, astrophysicist Sperello di Serego Alighieri, is pushing for a posthumous pardon.

At a retrial scheduled in May, historians, linguists and lawyers will seek to determine whether the corruption charge would stand today. Among those participating is law professor Alessandro Traversi, a descendant of the official who convicted Dante. If there is an afterlife, Dante is probably coming around to the idea that hell is on earth after all.