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## Hell as an Exploration of Sin: A Comparison of Alan Moore's Providence to Dante's Inferno

Zachary Rutledge  
*Peninsula College*

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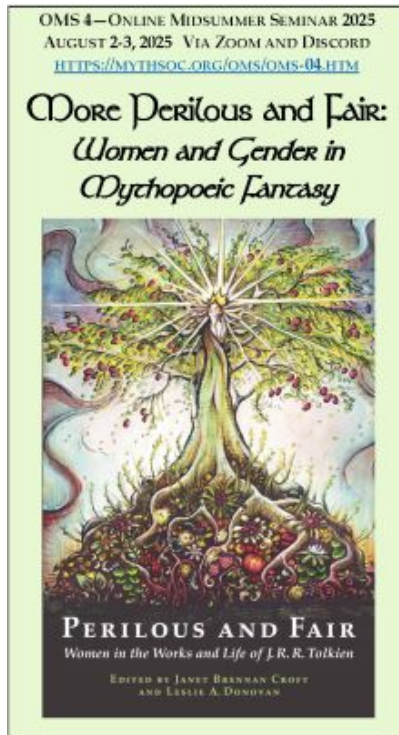
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## Hell as an Exploration of Sin: A Comparison of Alan Moore's Providence to Dante's Inferno

### Abstract

In Alan Moore's graphic novel *Providence*, Robert Black travels Lovecraftian New England and suffers a series of horrifying encounters—each an allusion to a Lovecraft story. These encounters contain direct references to various sins and taboos, thereby making explicit much of the sublimated sexuality in Lovecraft's works. Therefore, Black's journey constitutes not only a trip through Lovecraft's mythology but also reads as a cataloguing of sins reminiscent of Dante's passage through the levels of sin in *Inferno*. This paper identifies and explores the similarities between Dante and Black as examples of those who descend to the underworld along with a consideration of the function of such texts as a way to catalogue and understand sin.

### Additional Keywords

Good and evil; Myth in fantasy literature; Moore, Alan. *Providence*; Moore, Alan—Influence of H.P. Lovecraft; Lovecraft, H.P.—Influence on Alan Moore; Dante. *Inferno*; Sin in fantasy literature

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CELL AS AN EXPLORATION OF SIN:  
A COMPARISON OF ALAN MOORE'S  
PROVIDENCE TO DANTE'S INFERNO

ZACHARY RUTLEDGE

DANTE ALIGHIERI'S *DIVINE COMEDY* AND Alan Moore's graphic novel *Providence* both describe a pilgrim's journey into a horrific landscape that resonates with their own sins and with humanity's. To discuss these sins both authors must identify what is sinful. Despite the seven hundred years that separate their works, both address how sin—and its antithesis, virtue—are historically contextualized and understood. In considering this history, Dante and Moore evaluate and revise authors that have influenced their works. For Dante, Virgil and Aristotle are important for establishing a moral order. They represent the classical world so that Dante, through comparison, can delineate the values of the Christian world. Moore's *Providence* is a recasting of the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Thus, Lovecraft's stories and the time in which they are contextualized provide the moral basis against which Moore builds his story.

The purpose of this paper is to show how Dante and Moore have a similar program in their two works. This paper seeks to compare the ways in which the two authors address both the topic of sin as well as how they revise and appropriate artifacts from their literary lineage in order to identify what is sinful. The authors explore and evaluate sin, and in so doing, enforce a philosophical order that acts to reinterpret the characters and stories of their predecessors. In the two works, the retelling provides a historical and cultural context for sin and thereby serves as a critique of the notion of the ahistoricity of sin.

To accomplish this exploration, I order this discussion as follows. First, I provide some background and context of the two works. Second, I discuss the way Dante responds to Virgil and the classical world. Then, I compare this to Moore's response to Lovecraft. I follow this with a few examples of common images and characters in both *Providence* and *Inferno*, showing a similar purpose for each one in the texts. Finally, I conclude with how the analysis of sin creates the threat of lurid voyeurism, and how both Moore and Dante offer a warning to the reader by showing awareness of their art as spectacle.

*INFERNO AND PROVIDENCE*

The literature and philosophy of the classical world influence Dante's *Inferno* in a complex and nuanced way. Simone Marchesi's analysis of "Classical Culture" in *The Divine Comedy* points to Dante's ambivalence about the use of classical material. Marchesi states that some texts such as Aristotle's work on science are taken as "valid" sources of knowledge, whereas other texts, such as Virgil's, are assumed to be the subject of necessary correction by a Christian thinker (135). Marchesi points to a process in which Dante treats classical texts as "repositories of information," yet at the same time evaluates these texts against each other as well as from a Christian perspective (135). Marchesi concludes that "While the *Comedy's* horizon of reference is unabashedly Christian, its building blocks, especially but not solely in *Inferno*, are mainly classical" (131). Thus, Dante builds on this literature, but his project is also revisionist in nature.

This classical foundation is partly an ethical one and is placed alongside Christian morality to create an ordering in *Inferno* that is a hybridization of pagan and Christian values. On the classical side Virgil, in *Inferno* XI, reminds Dante how Aristotle divided sins into incontinence, malice, and mad bestiality. Incontinence having to do with a lack of control of physical urges, malice including violence and basic fraud, and mad bestiality having to do with "extreme cruelty" (Corbett 64). Considering these three, we have the basic plan of hell—incontinence mapping to upper hell, malice mapping to violence and fraud in the lower circles, and mad bestiality associated with the ninth and deepest circle (Corbett 64).

In this way, Dante forces Christian contemporaries to consider models of pagan virtue; however, he must be careful to demarcate pagan from Christian in terms of the ultimate righteousness of the latter. To announce clearly the Christian orientation of his text, Dante revises some characters, like Ulysses, whom Dante pulls from his heroic status and recognizes as a false counselor. In addition, as will be discussed later, Dante fuses the Christian image of the fork-wielding demon with the variation of Aristotle's malice with which Dante is in some ways most concerned: fraud, in the form of barratry. According to George Corbett, Dante felt fraud, in general, "perverts human reason and its expression through language" (66). Corbett argues that the structure of hell shows that Dante considered fraud a sin that could "undermine the very foundations of civil society" (66). Taken together, the above shows some examples of how Dante combines classical and contemporary to create a moral ordering to fit into his time and cultural context. In his ordering of sin and reinterpretation of classical figures, he reflects the historical context of sinfulness, namely, what is sinful to one generation may not be sinful to the next or vice versa as in the case of Ulysses.

The recognition that the understanding of sin has a connection to cultural time and place is something of which C.S. Lewis was aware in *The Great Divorce* (1946), which shares structural elements and themes with Dante's *Inferno*. Marsha Daigle-Williamson analyzes the impact of *The Divine Comedy* in Lewis's work in her book, *Reflecting the Eternal* (2015). In this work she notes that Lewis places less emphasis on the capital vices, instead preferring to focus on the sins identified in Dante's *Purgatorio*: perverted love and disordered love (138). Lewis emphasizes the versions of sin that he felt threatened twentieth-century Christians—just as Dante focuses on fraud due to its threat to the society that he understood in his day.

By contextualizing these sins in modern terms, Lewis is both using Dante's work but also revising it, creating a relationship that roughly approximates some of the aspects of Dante's relationship to classical works of ethics. Daigle-Williamson sees that "Lewis's illustrations of sin [in *The Great Divorce*] do not duplicate Dante's medieval categories of sin, but his illustrations present modern attitudes that are readily recognizable by today's reader" (138-9). Thus, authors such as Dante and Lewis recognize the historical context of sin in order, if nothing else, to connect with the readers of their time.

Moving to the early twenty-first century, we find a different moral context in which Alan Moore writes, and Jacen Burrows illustrates, a twelve-volume comic series, *Providence*. This work, the third in a horror trilogy, is a response to the collected oeuvre of H.P. Lovecraft, the American weird fiction author, whose most famous works were produced in the 1920s and 1930s.

*Providence* follows the narrator, Robert Black, through a Lovecraftian version of 1919 New England in which he experiences, one after another, the characters and situations from Lovecraft's stories as if they were historical occurrences. The impetus of his travels is that Black is writing a book concerning secret societies in America, which for him is nothing more than a desperate attempt to write in coded language about his own experiences of otherness in America given that he is Jewish and gay. Black is also running away from the suicide of his lover, Jonathan Russell, who Black refers to as Lily. Lily commits suicide in response to Black breaking off the relationship. Black left Lily out of fear that his sexuality would be revealed to his employer—thus ending his career. Black's journey reaches apotheosis when he meets Lovecraft himself, who is a character in the novel, possessing some of the famed mannerisms of the author, yet also clearly a fictionalized version of Moore's devising. Black discovers, to his horror, that Lovecraft is inextricably wound into the secret occult worlds that he has been studying.

Although the story follows Black, the larger story of *Providence* is an inverted Christian allegory, casting a fictionalized Lovecraft as John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Christ. The stories of the fictional Lovecraft prepare

the way for the human-born Cthulhu, who serves as a messiah figure. All occurs in fulfillment of a prophecy recorded in an ancient text, *Hali's Book of the Wisdom of the Stars*, which would eventually be called the *Necronomicon*. It is Black's experiences in this New England hell, as recorded in his notebook, that ultimately serve as the raw material for Lovecraft's stories. These stories in turn enter the collective subconscious of humanity and ultimately cause the breakdown of human reality in favor of the true reality, which is the bizarre landscape of what was mistakenly understood to be humanity's unconsciousness.

Although much of the twelve books of *Providence* have a traditional comic paneling format, for volumes two through ten, about one-third of the page space is from Black's commonplace book, which contains Black's own journal writing along with excerpts from books and periodicals that he picks up along his journey. Therefore, the work is a hybrid style between comic and epistolary, which invites comparison to the *Inferno* given that its narrator is also self-consciously its writer.

Black's journey is horrific as Moore forces the reader to deal with sins of various types. In particular, Moore addresses some sins important to contemporary readers such as homophobia, misogyny, and racism. Indeed, Black's journey, like Dante's, constitutes a trip through a type of hell, or as Jake Poller states, "Moore represents Lovecraft's imaginary dreamworld as an actual realm, akin to mythic underworlds such as Hades" (71).

Both *Providence* and *Inferno* tell the journey of one soul through the abyss, which engenders for that soul a transformation. For Dante, it is a conversion and rescue from the dark woods of life. For Black, it is also a type of conversion, but one that reveals to him the nature of putative reality versus the subconscious. For Dante, this conversion is enabled by his love for Beatrice and her ability to send the guide Virgil to aid him when he is in the dark woods at the beginning of *Inferno*. Black's conversion is also propelled by love, but it is of a negative type. It is his guilt about the suicide of his lover that serves as the impetus for his journey.

#### DANTE'S INTELLECTUAL LINEAGE

By placing authors such as Homer, Ovid, and Virgil in Limbo, Dante shows them a certain measure of esteem. Respect for the artist aside, Dante must address the works of these authors in such a way as to make them fit within his world view. He has to evaluate them through his own contemporary set of values. With Homer, he judges Ulysses—the protagonist of the *Odyssey*. Dante alters the ending of the Ulysses story so that the Greek hero of the Trojan war convinces his fellow shipmates to continue in their journey. Ulysses counsels his mates that they should go beyond what is known to continue their exploration.

He tells them that they were not meant "to live as a mere brute does, / But for the pursuit of knowledge and the good" (*Inferno*, XXVI:114-115). They find themselves approaching the mountain of Purgatory and their ship is destroyed at sea with all perishing. Ulysses then finds himself in the circle of the fraudulent—specifically the eighth bolge, which contains the false counselors. This is a sin so vile to Dante that its circle is lower in hell than many other circles including those containing murderers, heretics, thieves, and barrators. Placing Ulysses in hell at all, much less so deep, seems to be incongruous with the respect that Dante shows to Homer. This again points to the subtle and nuanced way that Dante appropriates and revises classical material. He recognizes the artistry of Homer and does not condemn him for celebrating a hell-bound sinner such as Ulysses. Yet, Dante is compelled to revise Homer's story so that Ulysses is re-presented in a medieval Christian context and judged accordingly.

Charles Williams, in *The Figure of Beatrice* (1943), explains the analogous situation vis-à-vis Virgil by stating that "The *Aeneid* has *pietas* and not *caritas*" (112)—the former being a sense of obligation to the state and the latter being a love for God. In this way, Williams is explicating an important distance that Dante is placing between Virgil and the redeemed like Beatrice who possess Christian charity. Further, Williams notes that Beatrice has to ask Virgil to assist Dante, thus showing the independence of poetry from religion (112)—a distinction between a person as recognized by their practiced craft versus their moral and religious framework held during life.

But more than the placement, it is the recasting of the Ulysses tale that shows Dante's appropriation of classical elements in order to communicate a story of conversion in a Christian universe. By doing so, Dante is attacking the monolithic notion of the classical hero. "The transformation of Ulysses' circular journey into a linear disaster is a Christian critique of epic categories, a critique of earthly heroism from beyond the grave" (Freccero, *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* 139). The linear versus circular refers to the return of the hero home in the classical mode of storytelling as opposed to the linear orientation of Christianity which finds a finite end to human existence at Judgment Day. Dante is communicating an eschatology that is incommensurate with a worldview of endlessly repeated cycles of stories that align with an unending reign of gods on Mt. Olympus.

Dante's judgement of Ulysses reflects his re-evaluation of sin. Being heroic in the classical sense was not sufficient to ensure the type of humility and sense of obligation to the greater order that would be manifested in the word *pietas*. In comparison, Dante recognizes the piety of Aeneas, Virgil's protagonist from *The Aeneid*. Dante argues that in his Christian world, being humble in the face of the divine order is more important than Greek-styled heroism.



In *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion* (1986), John Freccero analyzes another example of Dante's revisionist enterprise in *Inferno* III. In this scene, Dante compares via simile the damned souls falling into the river Acheron to falling leaves: "As leaves in quick succession sail down in autumn / Until the bough beholds its entire store / Fallen to the earth" (*Inferno*, III:93-95). Dante's comparison is an allusion to the same one made by Virgil in describing the souls of the underworld when Aeneas crosses the Styx in the sixth book of *The Aeneid*. However, in Freccero's analysis, Virgil's use of falling leaves indicates the inevitable death of the human body, but for Dante's version of the simile, a spiritual death is referenced (148). Thus, Dante is literally rewriting his predecessor's words, changing the focus to the spiritual. By making this comparison in hell, Dante shows that humanity's descent may resemble falling leaves, but it is not ineluctable for all as it is for the leaves on a tree. Dante thus highlights the importance of choice in the election to maintain a sinful state.

Instead of a simile as in the previous example, in *Inferno* XIII, Dante borrows a device that we today might associate with horror. Dante transforms the souls of the suicides into trees. Upon entering this grove, Dante is confused by the sounds of disembodied voices that echo around him. Dante plucks a twig from a nearby branch, causing the tree, whose name is Pier della Vigna, to bleed. Virgil recognizes this as a needless action, coming as a result of Dante not believing Virgil's own words concerning Polydorus in *The Aeneid*. If he had done so, Dante would have recalled the related scene from *The Aeneid* III and that Polydorus had been transformed into a tree like the suicides of the seventh circle (Mazzotta 69). Giuseppe Mazzotta adds in *Reading Dante* (2014) that "It is as if Dante wants to test the truth value of what he had read in his guide's text" (69).

Polydorus is killed by treachery but at issue is the lack of proper burial—a lack that keeps him trapped as a plant. The lack of proper burial reflects the dishonorable nature of his death. Dante twists this around by indicating that suicide is also a dishonorable death that itself thwarts the body's journey to an honorable resting place (Mazzotta 68). Thus, Dante agrees with Virgil that a lack of proper burial is the upshot of a sin, but Dante includes the complicity of the sinner's intellect, in so much that it creates an envy and pride that propels della Vigna to the act. Mazzotta concludes that it is della Vigna's envy in combination with the act of suicide that renders him treebound, citing other suicides whom Dante does not place in the copse (71).

If we consider Polydorus's case with modern sensibilities, Polydorus is a victim. His entrapment in a tree is a result of an unfortunate destiny that ran him afoul of the gods' laws concerning treachery, proper burial, and desecration of ground. In our modern sense, Polydorus really did nothing but be on a war's losing side, namely the Trojans who had just lost their war. Dante, on the other hand, emphasizes della Vigna's personal responsibility in the act that rendered

him as tree. These cases show again Dante's revisions of classical images and scenes to reflect the morality of his time, thus emphasizing the importance of considering the historical context of sin.

#### WORKING IN THE SHADOW OF LOVECRAFT

Jackson Ayres makes the connection that "If Lovecraft is one of Moore's spiritual artistic ancestors, then Moore's horror trilogy might be seen as a reckoning with his own artistic genealogy" (149). Moore shares with Lovecraft common approaches to writing, namely a drive toward "creative borrowing and revision" (149) and a draw toward magic and the occult. Yet, Moore addresses "the misogyny and racism laden within Lovecraftian horror" (149). Thus, we see a complicated relationship between Moore and Lovecraft not unlike the one between Dante and Virgil.

As Dante faces the moral failings of his predecessors, Moore judges Lovecraft the person and the artist. Specifically, Moore accuses Lovecraft of suppressing sexuality and eroticism in his works. Victoria Nelson observes that "An aura of sexual squeamishness and repulsion hovers like a low and unattended fog around [Lovecraft's] descriptions; sex is *the* major unaddressed issue of Lovecraft's work" (115). In Moore's opinion, sexual repression—in general, not just in Lovecraft's work—leads to a misdirection of that force and to violence (Kozaczka 490). Applying this specifically to Lovecraft, the argument can be made that Moore wishes to express this sublimated energy explicitly in *Providence*, thus diffusing its suppressed negative energies. This expression also forces Lovecraft's readership to face the sometimes dark sexuality that is left between the lines in his famed stories.

For example, *The Dunwich Horror* (1929) tells of a young woman, Lavinia, giving birth to twin entities. The father of these two, half-human creatures is Yog-Sothoth, one of the deities in the Lovecraft pantheon. Burleson notes the tie to Jesus, Horus, and Lao-Tzu and other characters born of women and gods (146). While Lovecraft may be using a mythic pattern, he is, as Lévy indicates, also drawn to an "inverted aesthetic," which guides the author towards "infamy and sacrilege" (88). Thus, Lovecraft is not creating a virgin Mary—a character who would lend herself to subsequent saintly reverence. By giving Lavinia a name and some basic descriptions, Derie observes that Lovecraft provides more to Lavinia as a character than other "matrons" in his stories (85). However, this falls short of providing evidence of her as being a fully realized literary character. Further, by the end, after she has completed her purpose in the plot, which was to give birth, she is "brushed aside" (85), perhaps killed by one of her hybrid children.

Black meets Moore's incarnation of Lavinia, named Letty, and hears her story in *Providence* 4.<sup>1</sup> Moore gives her, in some way, a more detailed voice in the story than Lovecraft did in his. It is apparent that she is childlike even though she is fully grown—although it is not clear if her confused and simple, childlike nature is congenital or a result of trauma. She creates crayon pictures of stick people in a type of therapy in order to cope with the events of the night she conceived her sons. She communicates to Black that it was her father who had sex with her—presumably while possessed by Yog-Sothoth. She gives some of her crayon drawings to Black, in the hope that he will include them in the book he will author.

The crayon stick pictures, of Letty with her father on her and another of her supernatural offspring, are present in the comic and serve more than anything to represent a horror that Lovecraft did not describe. Moore is forcing the reader to confront a possible implication of Lovecraft's story. Similar to the way Dante questions the ethics of a Ulyssean hero in order to understand the true nature of the man who would undertake such adventures, Moore is asking the reader to interrogate the Lovecraft story and explore fully what is implied about the young mother. And part of this questioning is about consensual sex and rape. Can Letty (or Lavinia) be responsible for her sexual relationship with her father who is presumably possessed by a Lovecraftian deity? The way in which Moore describes Letty—slow and confused—the reader is left with the unsettling answer of “no.” In addition, by showing the way in which Letty deals emotionally with the conception of her children by drawing the crayon pictures, an activity her father refers to as “doin’ your figurin’ out” (*Providence* 4), Moore is creating a fuller character for Letty than Lovecraft did for Lavinia. It is a character who has been traumatized and the reader witnesses the aftermath. Not only is Moore showing the sexual horror that may be underlying Lovecraft's work, by suggesting notions of sexual consent, he is evaluating the literature's expression of sin through a contemporary lens.

As with Dante's manipulation of Virgil's simile, Moore also can twist a racist metaphor<sup>2</sup> from Lovecraft's *The Shadow over Innsmouth* (1936), which tells of sea-creatures who have copulated with the townspeople of Innsmouth to produce a hybrid people. These creatures can be seen as manifesting Lovecraft's

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<sup>1</sup> *Providence* is not paginated. Therefore, the citations in this paper for *Providence* reference volume number.

<sup>2</sup> The metaphor that sees the hybrid folk of Innsmouth as representing Lovecraft's fear of miscegenation and therefore a representation of racism on Lovecraft's part is not the only interpretation. Bursleson sees the story as being about the fear of the past and how the deeds of past generations filter down to the present, since the narrator of the story ultimately discovers that he is of Innsmouth lineage (172). Klinger also notes that the story, more than expressing racism, is about the evil of humanity's “lust for immortality” (573).

fear of miscegenation if we compare the sea-creatures to immigrants. This invasion of an alien species and its cross breeding with humans could be seen as a metaphor for Lovecraft's racist views (Klinger 573). Moore maintains the metaphor but twists it in order to place the situation into an entirely different moral landscape.

Specifically, in *Providence* 3, Black travels to Salem, Moore's equivalent of Innsmouth, to meet with Tobit Boggs, who may possess information about the Stella Sapiente and *Hali's Book*. Boggs is a hybrid by the rendition given in the comic as well as by Black's description in his journal, referring to Boggs's "Salem face." Unlike Lovecraft's hybrids, Boggs appears congenial and non-threatening. He takes Black for a tour of parts of his refinery, beneath which are hidden old smuggling routes where fish-like humans were secretly brought into the town. In this tour, Boggs indicates a history of persecution from the non-hybrids in the area when the pair encounter a swastika left as a threat to the hybrids, which in the timeline of the story would have been before the Nazi appropriation of the symbol.

In a dream sequence after meeting Boggs, Black sees numerous fish piled up in a gas chamber—an image that prefigures the gassing of the Jews and others by the Nazis, which in Moore's *Providence* world of 1919 would have been a future event. This scene acts to recapitulate the swastika symbol found by Black and Boggs. By making this comparison, Moore focuses on the hybrids' role as outsiders and emphasizes the potential for marginalization and persecution. Further, Moore twists the Innsmouth metaphor by changing the comparison from fish people being identified with immigrants that threaten an Anglo-dominant culture to fish people being equated to immigrants, *many of whom may be from historically persecuted groups such as those of the Jewish faith*. It is a deftly made twist that acts to upend the moral hierarchy that could be inferred from the Lovecraft stories to reflect better the weighting of values in the twenty-first century.

The last example of this section is reminiscent of Dante's poetic decision to exchange the spirit of Polydorus and replace it with Pier della Vigna in *Inferno* XIII.<sup>3</sup> This kind of transfer of consciousness is one that is made an explicit point of horror for Lovecraft in "The Thing on the Doorstep" (1937) in which, Derby, a friend of the narrator, has married a woman, Alsenath Waite, whose consciousness has been exchanged with her father's. The source of the horror is that Derby is married to his father-in-law, who is some manner of occult wizard, intent on ultimately transferring into Derby's body.

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<sup>3</sup> There are two levels of transference here. In the first, Dante makes the decision to appropriate the scene from Virgil and to replace Polydorus with della Vigna. In the second, Dante and Virgil place the consciousness of their respective characters into a plant.

However, as with Lavinia, the storyline seems to disregard the character of Alsenath—to the degree that the *real* character is stuck in her father's body from a soul transference that occurred before the action of the story. Although Moore does not give this character a voice as he did with Lavinia, he uses the shell of the character, Alsenath, renaming her Elspeth, to switch Lovecraft's focal point of horror. This is accomplished in a scene in which Black travels to Manchester to visit St. Anselm's school, which are Moore's versions of Arkham and Miskatonic University. Mentally, Elspeth, like Alsenath, is not what she appears. She is actually Etienne Roulet, an occultist; and before inhabiting her body, Roulet had inhabited her father's body. Roulet's spirit then trades consciousness with Black. Thus, Black is in Elspeth's body, and Roulet is in Black's body. Using Black's body, Roulet rapes Black. This scene emphasizes the horror of bodily displacement and retells the Lovecraft story in a way that makes it clear that during Derby's marriage to Alsenath, she was never able to give consent to their union. Thus, Derby's spousal relationship *with the body of Alsenath* would constitute repeated rape.

Here again, we see a focus on the hidden sexual horror in Lovecraft's work. By considering the transference of the narrator into Elspeth's body, Moore clarifies the lack of consent implicit in the original text. Further, this points again to the changing nature of sin to the degree that consent and what it means to give consent is much more part of contemporary twenty-first century conversations than it was a century ago.

#### CLASSICAL AND CHRISTIAN IMAGERY

For both Moore and Dante, a descent into the underworld involves encounters with mythic symbols of the past. Moore's protagonist, beyond navigating the hellish landscape of Lovecraftian New England, makes four trips to more literal underworlds during his explorations. Some of these are basements and underground tunnels, but another is a dream space down a length of stairs that is accessed through a type of hypnosis. In these underworlds, as with Dante's, graveyards, winged demons and classical gorgons make appearances and can be associated with particular sins.

It is not surprising to see a similarity in imagery and creatures in *Inferno* and *Providence*, given the close study of Lovecraft's works that Moore has clearly accomplished and given that Lovecraft himself held Dante in high esteem. Lovecraft recommended the reading of Dante in his "Suggestions for a Reading Guide" (186). In addition, he referred to the presence of the "dark, supernal magic" of the Gustave Doré illustrations for Dante in the home of his youth (Joshi 33). Doré's illustrations alone would have provided the imagery of graveyards and winged demons from the *Inferno*, but more importantly, the reference indicates Lovecraft's respect for Dante, as Lovecraft calls him, "a

pioneer in the classic capture of macabre atmosphere" ("Supernatural Horror in Literature" 86).

The gorgon, Medusa, is evoked in *Inferno* IX at the gates of Dis. Freccero connects the Medusa figure to Dante's past (*Dante* 128). In this canto, Dante alludes to one of his previous works, a set of poems entitled *Rime Petrose*. This older work is to a woman but not to Beatrice. Freccero argues that Dante is distancing himself from the work and acknowledging the error in writing it. Further by connecting the rhyme for the lady "whose hardness turns the poet, her lover, into a man of stone" (128) and the gorgon's power to petrify those who view her, Dante links the fearful Medusa to the power of our past transgressions to threaten our forward progress spiritually.

Black, too, in his first descent, which is literally into the basement of Robert Suydam's house, faces a representation of a specter from his past. Matching with the Lovecraft short story, "The Horror at Red Hook" (1927), Black finds that the basement is actually a vast space in which terrifying rites have been performed. These rites have summoned the demon Lilith who pursues Black with fangs and claws, repeating only the word, "Hoo. Hoo."

Alexanyan traces the origins of the incantation used in the rites cited in the original Lovecraft work to a work by Hippolytus of Rome (38). The creature evoked in the Hippolytus original is an amalgamation of various mythological creatures, including the gorgon. The evocation follows the formula of identifying the deity by describing its characteristics through repeated phrases "thou who" and then the description. In other words, the evocation, in translation, repeats "who" just as the creature who chases Black does.

This amounts to the threat of a gorgon, rather than the actual gorgon. Even in *Inferno* IX, there is never an actual gorgon, but rather the threat as provided by the angry Furies. Moore's story presents a fear of feminine power that the minds of these men have placed into an underworld. In addition, just as Dante links the gorgon to the regrets of his own past, Moore connects the imagery of this threatening female to Black's past, viz. his part in the death of his love, Lily. Black makes the connection himself when he psychologizes the incident—interpreting in a Freudian way—that he must have hallucinated the image of the demon Lilith simply because of the similarity in name to his own Lily. The twist given by Moore is that, to the degree that the gorgon represents a past sin, namely Black's role in the suicide of Lily, he should face it. It is something that he should return to and not suppress. If he had been able to do so, then he may have stopped his journey, which would have ended the progression toward the apocalyptic scenario foretold in *Hali's Book*.

Graveyards, a gothic trope, appear in the sixth circle of hell in which Dante encounters the heretics, including the Greek Epicureans and anyone else who denied metaphysical existence. These sinners sit forever in their own

graves since they “call the soul dead / When the flesh dies” (*Inferno*, X:12-13). In this scene, we see why Lovecraft regarded Dante as an early innovator of a gothic style. When Lovecraft put his characters into moldering graveyard scenes, he may have been summoning a macabre atmosphere, but Moore, by imitating a graveyard scene in *Providence 8*, may also be commenting on Lovecraft’s own materialist philosophy, which Lovecraft links to classical Epicureanism. Or as Lovecraft, in his “In Defence of Dagon,” observes, “Materialism has represented man’s most thoughtful attitude since the days of Leucippus and Democritus, and was the central phase of the Epicurean school” (50).

The scene comes as Black follows his guide, Randall Carver, into an underworld accessed through hypnosis. Carver is Moore’s re-imagining of Randolph Carter from Lovecraft’s stories. Carter is a writer and could be read as Lovecraft himself. Thus, Moore has orchestrated a scene in which Lovecraft, by proxy, is guiding the narrator down a length of stairs into an underworld—the entrance of which opens into a large graveyard. This is a scene not unlike Virgil guiding Dante in the circle containing the heretics. And thanks to Dante, the crumbling graves and cenotaphs in *Providence 8* are images laden with meaning. In particular, they recollect the finality of death for those, like Lovecraft, without metaphysical beliefs.

Moore’s text can be taken as criticizing this materialist position as Black appears to hold a similar view. Throughout the comic series and in his descent with Carver, Black understands, explains, and rationalizes much of what he sees through Freudian and Jungian psychology, which would have been the cutting edge of psychological research in 1919. By hiding behind psychological explanations for what he sees, Black avoids dealing with the reality of what is threatening to open up into his world, namely, an apocalypse of Lovecraftian creatures who claim hegemony over what constitutes reality. Thus, Black is positioned like Farinata and Cavalcanti in their graves who refuse the spiritual reality apparent to them and seem only concerned with a materially pragmatic discussion of family or of Florentine politics. In addition, as Mazzotta explains, this canto is connected to Cavalcanti’s son, Guido, an important friend to Dante. Specifically, Mazzotta compares Guido’s Averroism and his associated belief that love was a violent and destructive tendency in humans to Dante’s view of love. Mazzotta states, in interpreting Dante’s position, that knowledge of God is attained “By love, by thinking about love: that’s the way of the ascent” (63). It’s Moore’s narrator who let fear, sexual repression, and worldly ambition outweigh his love for Lily, thus aligning himself with an anti-love outcome not dissimilar to Dante’s Guido.

Finally, Dante’s descent forces him to confront the sins associated with his public life—or at least the sins he has been accused of (Pinsky 335). Dante

devotes *Inferno* XXI and XXII to this sin with the threat of it so palpable that the devils chase Dante and Virgil into *Inferno* XXIII. This sin is barratry, which is the exchange of political favors for money. It is corruption and by devoting considerable poetic space to it, Dante understands the danger of this form of fraud. Further, as a former public official Dante recognizes the pull of this sin as he is drawn into the exchanges between sinners and demons who guard this bolge.

It is interesting to note that Dante provides a scene that is by now a hellish cliché: the sinners guilty of barratry burn forever in hot pitch while being poked by pitchfork wielding devils with tusks, claws, wings, and tails. The devils serve in actively dispensing the punishment. And as Freccero notes with the *Inferno*, the sin is identified with the punishment (*Dante* 107). Thus, if we include the devils as part of the punishment then they are a symbolic manifestation of barratry. The devils are the corruption that stabs and flays at the soul and incessantly pulls the sinner back into the black pitch of its malfeasance, reflecting the complex and sticky web of deceit created by the social nature of this sin.

Lovecraft, too, had a type of demon not dissimilar to Dante's creatures from the fifth bolge. Black confronts the nightgaunts, which, as Lovecraft notes in a letter, had been a creature which haunted the nightmares of his youth (Joshi 50) and bears some resemblance to Dante's devils. These gaunts are described as having bat wings, horns on their head that curved toward each other, and a barbed tail (Lovecraft, "The Dream-Quest of Unknown Kadath" 131). After Black and Carter pass beyond the graves, the gaunts swoop down and carry away the pair just at the moment when the two are being lifted into the air toward the moon by the cats of Ulthar.

As with the other parts of Black's descent with Carver, this sequence is heavy with symbolism and intertwined with the Lovecraftian mythos. If we take the moon to be symbolic of the demon Lilith, then the gaunts are thwarting Black's reunion with his love—or in a psychological sense, the gaunts are preventing acknowledgement of Black's role in Lily's death and his inability to confront how his negative views of his own sexuality contributed to it. Continuing with the identification of the demon with the sin, we can think of the gaunt as a sin. But which one? The gaunts are a repressive force. They tease Black with a tickling while they carry him—a tickling that feels vaguely erotic and makes Black uncomfortable. Thus, the demon gaunt is an embodiment of what Moore criticizes—the repressive forces that work against sexual expression.



## METAFICTION

In a final mode of comparison between Dante and Moore regarding the exploration of sin and what it accomplishes for reader, narrator, and author, it is interesting to consider the voyeurism inherent in reading fiction such as *The Divine Comedy* and *Providence*, both of which manifest personal human suffering to such an extended degree. Dante is aware of this danger in detailing his story, and we can see this when Virgil admonishes Dante as he becomes enthralled with the arguing of Master Adam and Sinon. “I listened to them intently—then I heard / My master: ‘Stare a little longer,’ he said, / ‘And I will quarrel with you!’” (*Inferno*, XXX:132-134).

The reader of *The Divine Comedy* can be accused of taking pleasure in a type of *schadenfreude*, indulging in viewing the suffering of others. Even though this indulgence does not seem to fit into any particular circle of hell, Virgil’s warning to Dante stands as a warning to the reader as well. Indeed, in the last lines of *Inferno* XXX, “Virgil rebukes not only Dante but all those who prefer the *Inferno* to the *Paradiso*—*chè voler ciò udire è bassa voglia*—to wish to hear so is a vulgar desire” (Williams 140). It is a criticism of the reader and a warning to read these texts with appropriate care and for the correct reasons. We should read Dante’s story to understand our own path to conversion—not to indulge in the failures and sufferings of others.

We can view Virgil’s warnings as Dante pointing to a weakness of his poetic goals; namely, that he has to present evil things in order to identify their threat to the world. Moore, too, critiques the genre in which he works by emphasizing the voyeurism that can be inherent in comic books. Indeed, Moore’s work portrays graphic violence and sexuality that can be seen as gratuitous and prurient—however, by doing so, Moore shows a “determination to challenge common patterns of representation, and by prolonging the reader’s exposure to the horrific details of the story, a critique of his/her own voyeurism is also elicited” (Di Liddo 203). Ayres notes dubiously, concerning such interpretations of Moore, that “These generous readings take Moore’s horror comics as critical metafictional exercises: they indulge Lovecraft’s racism and dysfunctional sexuality to subvert those elements” (150). Whether Moore is operating purely in the mode of critique or if he is indulging baser elements in his work is unknowable by reading the text alone, but the impact of his work demonstrates both—just as with Dante. It is prurient and voyeuristic to those who are approaching it for the wrong reasons, but it is also important social commentary and material for individual moral reflection to those who are prepared to engage with it as such.

To the degree that Moore’s goal is to critique the reader as voyeur, these graphic elements are necessary to accomplish this metafictional goal. By making the reader subject to the criticism, he pulls the reader into the context of

the sin, making it difficult to consider these sins in abstraction. "Moore's view seems to be that graphic representations of violence are justifiable if they convey some meaningful idea" (Ayres 186–7) and the meaning is created by the reader's experience of the text.

Dante seems to recognize a similar kind of trade-off in his use of the creature Geryon at the entrance to the eighth circle—the levels of fraud. Freccero comments on Geryon's retreat at the end of the canto in which the creature "vanished like an arrow from the string" (*Inferno*, XVII:127). Freccero finds that "The surliness of the monster [Geryon] before and during the flight, in contrast to its departure when its mission is accomplished [...] suggests the deliberate harnessing of evil in order to favor the soul's progress" (Foreward xv). The irony is that this is a creature who is a physical representation of fraud, and Dante, in an apostrophe in the previous canto, swears that what he is saying in his description of Geryon is true. "I vow / By my *Commedia's* lines," (*Inferno*, XVI:109-110), he says. But it clearly is not true because there is no such creature as Geryon. In another level of irony, Dante and Virgil mount the creature to ride to the levels of fraud. Analogous to Moore's willingness to use graphic—even sinful—materials in his art, Dante's poem lies in order to tell a greater truth.

Finally, consider William Franke's observation that

The *Inferno* relentlessly undermines Dante's claims to a conventional, classical prophetic authority after the fashion of Virgil in order to make way for the possibility of authentically prophetic revelation in the event of the poem beyond the author's control, in which he and his work are taken up to become the vehicle of divine revelation. (97)

Franke points to the release of control of the poem so that the reader can have an interaction with the words that are not under authorial hegemony. This is similar to Moore's program that "challenges common patterns of representation." By abandoning these patterns, both Moore and Dante risk some of the legitimacy of their projects in order to call our attention to ourselves as readers and experiencers of their works.

## CONCLUSION

Dante Alighieri and Alan Moore seem worlds apart in many ways. Yet, I believe both have a deep urge to make their art philosophically meaningful and both are concerned with morality and what constitutes sin. With that stance, it is not difficult to see why both would write works that address the rights and wrongs of their respective worlds. Self-critical towards their work, they both look to their own art and its origins to consider the sins imbedded therein. Dante uses classical texts, but with careful limitations—always editing where he thinks appropriate to show the divine understanding provided by Christ. At times, he

edits stories to provide an alternative so that his judgment of the soul in question fits with its fate. Other times, he appropriates images such as falling leaves in the abyss or fantastic creatures such as talking trees. By using both of these, Dante pays homage to Virgil's prophetic powers, but by editing them, he shows the change in values that occurred in the centuries separating the two poets.

Recognizing Lovecraft's impact on horror and weird fiction, Moore addresses the staying power of Lovecraft's work but also retells it in a way that shows Lovecraft's sins as we would read them today. Moore shows clearly the misogyny and racism that might be inferred from Lovecraft's stories. In other words, Moore does not erase or write-out the misogynistic treatment of women characters nor the possible metaphors for racism. Rather, he takes these sins as the starting point, and he pushes the metaphor further and changes our focus of fear. He challenges us to sympathize with the persecuted creatures who are subjected to programs of eradication. He challenges us to see these women as fuller characters and to realize the implications of these storylines on their minds and bodies.

It is important to note that Moore is not saying that such creatures as the Salem hybrids are benevolent and do no harm. Moore, if anything, is pointing to the conflict inherent in this world and that violence is a fixture in it. This interpretation of Moore is given credence at the end of *Providence*, in which the Lovecraftian dreamworld takes root in the real world. Moore's vision at the end of *Providence* is an apocalyptic event—a violent shifting of power—not unlike Judgment Day. It is a time when the hidden power and hierarchy in the universe is revealed.

Under this new regime, Moore posits a kind of acceptance on the part of humanity about the end of the world (Ayres 152). In *Providence* 12, after the Lovecraftian nightmare world has supplanted human reality, the human mother of Cthulhu, Brears, states that there is no free will and that "It's all destiny. It's all providence. Just do what you *have* to." This is far from the paradise and the spiritual outcome that Dante envisions at the end of his journey through hell—a journey that is predicated on the spirit of intellectual free will. Moore shares in *Providence* a vision of a world that seems pessimistic and in which the human capacity to choose seems rendered ineffectual. But it would be too short-sighted to write off *Providence* as a work of profound pessimism. If *Providence* is to be compared to *Inferno*, then just as with *Inferno* and other works that depict hell, it would naturally show a great deal of pessimism. But it is pessimism with the hope of conversion or positive change, trying to push us toward a brighter end. And although Moore's narrator does not seem to reach this brighter end in *Providence*, we, as the readers, can contemplate the complicated message that Moore is providing about sin.

Finally, both authors are aware that by talking about sin, they risk their art falling into debauched spectacle. Both authors conclude that some amount of sinfulness may be required to accomplish the goal of their art. Yet, both put warnings in their text. There's no more striking warning than the one Moore provides when Robert Black tries to escape from Elspeth, who is trying to seduce him. He grabs the door handle to exit and stammers, "What *is* it with this place? I—is everybody crazy for sex or something?" (*Providence* 6). He then turns to face Elspeth and the reader. In this apostrophe, Moore calls attention to the fact that he's been talking a great deal about sex in *Providence*. But he is also looking straight at the reader, asking the reader the same question. "Why are you reading this book?" This is analogous to the comment made about those who would prefer *Inferno* to *Paradiso*. Why are you reading *Inferno*? Is it to undergo the experience of the pilgrim? Or is it to indulge your baser urges? Why are *you* interested in hell?

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**ZACHARY RUTLEDGE** is a professor at Peninsula College in Port Angeles, Washington. He teaches creative writing, mathematics, and symbolic logic. His research interests include psychogeography, the occult, and weird fiction. Within these realms, he enjoys exploring the thematic and linguistic connections between authors of differing time periods and genres with special attention to H.P. Lovecraft and his influence.

