

Dante And Virgil in Hell: An Analysis of the Religious Dimensions of an Artwork

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Abstract

This article explores different religious dimensions and interpretations in artworks. The interpretation of *The Divine Comedy*, written in the fourteenth century by Dante Alighieri, and the effects his work had in later centuries via an investigation of the work William-Adolphe Bouguereau, who was inspired by Dante are examined. Through the threads of their shared Catholic faiths, an exploration into how “religious art” (be it literature or painting) has not only changed over the centuries, but also how it continues to inspire, and to share common themes and attitudes is undertaken. These common themes are at the crux of this artwork, as both Dante and Bouguereau exist in two very different periods of time, and yet are seemingly linked through shared beliefs that beauty can and should be an inspiration, and can express profound truths.

Keywords: Art, Dante Alighieri, Inferno, *The Divine Comedy*, *Dante et Virgil*, William-Adolphe Bouguereau.

Introduction

William-Adolphe Bouguereau, a nineteenth century French painter owes one of his most magnificent art pieces, *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, to the story of the *Commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*), and the continued Catholic influence that existed both during thirteenth century Italy, and nineteenth century France. No secular text has inspired the minds of Christian artists and poets than *The Divine Comedy*, so much so that its stories have made their way into contemporary cinema, maintaining their relevance as fundamental sources for Western religion, culture, and art history. This essay will analyse the religious dimensions of William Adolphe Bouguereau’s *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, in-turn discussing the significance of *The Divine Comedy*, and the religiosity of both subjects. To do this, I will need to acknowledge the way in which “religious art” (art encompassing both the visual and literature) has changed over the centuries. I will then apply numerous methodological paradigms to bring a fresh reading of this impactful artwork.

Religion

Religion, interpreted as something that transcends one’s metaphysical relationship with a divine creator, and manifests itself into an artwork (icon, text, ritual, and so on) that communicates a consistent theme/ message/story regardless of time, is what makes religious

artworks significant to the field of Religious Studies. Seventeenth century Europeans viewing Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*,¹ were likely to understand the subject matter exactly without requiring any statement by the artist about the work's meaning, and might even connect it directly to artworks from their own era depicting similar biblical stories, such as Caravaggio's *The Supper at Emmaus*.² This is an example of the understanding of a specific cultural religion (Christianity), required in order to recognise the iconography of an artwork, and comprehend the religious elements of the selected artwork. Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is too a specific cultural convention.

Methodologies

The analysis of religious elements in Bouguereau's *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, sourced from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, will be done through the use of multiple methodologies, including symbolic analysis, historical analysis, and subject analysis. However, to understand this specific artwork from Bouguereau, it is necessary to first understand *The Divine Comedy*, its contents, purpose, and the religious character of its author, Dante Alighieri. To study religion is to study symbolism, and to study symbolism is to study art, but the scholarship of religion (and therefore symbolism) becomes contentious when a student of religion is confronted with a secular text (literary, visual, embodied and so on) that has great power and authority, comparable to scripture. Symbolic analysis will be a main mode of methodology used throughout this paper, especially when deciphering and comprehending the religious iconographic elements of Bouguereau's painting. The specific symbol analysis for Bouguereau's artwork will be done through the lens of Erwin Panofsky's triadic method of iconographic investigation, focusing on three main areas of investigation: subject matter, iconographic classification, and interpretation.³ This is a modern approach to investigating art, deviating from earlier standards, which instead prioritised the stylistic influences of an artwork, rather than the content of its themes. Symbolic analysis will also be used when analysing Dante's poetry as a literary text, however there are multiple considerations to be made when applying a methodological framework to *The Divine Comedy*.

Studying Dante applying a methodological lens to his work, continues to be a contentious task, even for Danteists, partly due to the proximity his poetry had to literal religious scripture, especially in the centuries following its publication. I do not propose that Dante was considered an authority, or that his work was regarded as scriptural, but rather that his status in Catholic religious circles is so high that one may utilise a traditionally scriptural methodology, like an exegesis or a partial exegesis.⁴ However, exegesis is a method originally (and almost exclusively) attached to scripture, making its use with nonscriptural texts potentially problematic. So therefore, for the purposes of this essay, a historical methodology will be used, combined with an exegesis-like description of *The Divine Comedy*, in order to provide the necessary contextual evidence to support my analysis on *Dante and Virgil in Hell*.

¹ Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, Santa Maria delle Grazie, Milan, 1495-1498.

² Caravaggio, *Supper at Emmaus*, National Gallery, London, 1601.

³ Brendan Cassidy, 'Iconography in theory and practice', *Visual Resources*, vol. 11, nos. 3-4 (1995), p. 324.

⁴ Robert Hollander, "'Dante' Theologus-Poeta', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 94 (1976), p. 95.



Figure 1. William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France (1850).

Dante Alighieri: *The Divine Comedy* and Catholicism in Thirteenth Century Italy

Florence in the fourteenth century boasted an impressive population of 90,000 people,⁵ making it one of the most populous areas in the country, a feat that granted it the reputation of being an epicentre for political discourse, economic growth, and overall development. During this time Florence, like Venice and Genoa, was a city-state, not yet succumbing to the rising pressure to live under any-one of the numerous noble dynasties throughout Italy.⁶ Dante Alighieri was born in Florence during the mid thirteenth century, to a family of the minor nobility,⁷ and worked as a politician in Florence, before his exile in 1302, under the instruction of the Black Guelphs, a political faction that supported Papal influence and control, which Dante vehemently (and very publicly) opposed. It would be during the years of his exile that Dante would write the *Commedia*, a grand poem consisting of three parts: *Purgatorio*, *Inferno*, and *Paradiso*, with 34, 33, and 33 cantos respectively.

To understand the motivations underlying Dante's most famous work, it is essential to first comprehend his views on love and religion. Dante's poetry was deeply Christian.⁸ His work was an ode to the metaphysical relationship he believed Italy, and more specifically

⁵ W. R Day, 'The Population of Florence before the Black Death: Survey and Synthesis', *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 28, no. 2 (2002), pp. 93–129.

⁶ Jean Boutier and Yves Sintome, trans. Sarah-Louise Raillard, 'The Republic of Florence (from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Centuries)', *Historical and Political Issues*, vol. 64, no. 6 (2014), pp. 1055-1081.

⁷ Gaetano Salvemini, 'Florence in the Time of Dante', *Speculum: A Journal of Mediaeval Studies*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1936), p. 322.

⁸ Hollander, "'Dante' Theologus-Poeta', p. 91.

Rome, had with God. It is unclear when Dante's affinity for and identification with Rome began, but he had expressed his faith and his admiration for Ancient Rome in many works, with the belief that he was of *Roman seed*,⁹ descended from ancient Romans. This glorification of Roman identity (specifically classical and imperial Rome) expresses Dante's belief that Romans became the next chosen people, the inheritors of the Israelites and the Jews. This, in his mind, is reinforced by the choice of Jesus to be born during the Hellenistic-Roman period, rather than any alternative.¹⁰ According to Dante, a sanction was given onto Rome by Christ, who allowed himself to be killed there, in order for the state to serve its purpose in accordance with *His* divine plan.¹¹



Figure 2. Sandro Botticelli's portrait of Dante Alighieri c. 1495 (Wikimedia Commons).

Rome held immense significance in fourteenth century Italy as the heart of Catholicism, the residence of the Pope, and signifying a united Christian identity, despite the fragmented nature of Christian society at the time. This egotistical inflation of not only Roman identity, but also his own, drives a lot of what Dante presents in *The Divine Comedy*, with many of the most significant figures, including his very own guide Virgil, being notable Roman philosophers. However, almost paradoxically, while Dante glorifies pre-Catholic, pagan Roman philosophers, in the same work he also degrades the morality of Popes such as Pope Celestine V, and more significantly, Pope Boniface VIII, placing them both in the Inferno. Pope Boniface VIII's inclusion in the Inferno is somewhat expected, as during Dante's time, he was not only alive, but also very much involved in Dante's exile from Florence.¹² This was, of course, until 1303, a year into Dante's exile, and a century before the publication of *The Divine Comedy*,

⁹ Salvemini, 'Florence in the Time of Dante', p. 322.

¹⁰ John Humphreys Whitfield, 'Dante and the Roman World', *Italian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1 (1978), p. 4.

¹¹ Joan M. Ferrante, 'Malebolge (Inf. xviii-xxx) as the Key to the Structure of Dante's 'Inferno'' *Romance Philology*, vol. 20, no. 4 (1967), p. 465.

¹² Thomas Caldecot Chubb, *Dante and His World* (New York: Little Brown, 1967), p. 317.

when he died of uncertain causes.¹³ Criticism of the papacy was a major theme throughout the *Inferno*, in large part due to Dante's public dislike for Pope Boniface VIII, but also due to the influence and overreach in temporal affairs by the Church at the time, and Dante's own stance on the excessive influence of the Papal states over Florence.

Dante sets the events of *The Divine Comedy* in the year 1300, a Jubilee year, and the first officialised one declared by Pope Boniface VIII. It is during this year that the Pope would grant indulgences for those pilgrimaging to the basilicas of saints such as St. Paul and St. Peter,¹⁴ an act which results in his damnation in Dante's poem. The selling of indulgences is one of the many sins directly stated in *The Divine Comedy*¹⁵ as being a core issue for corruption and greed in the Catholic church, and therefore a direct condemnation of Pope Boniface VIII and his sacrilegious decision to formalise the Jubilee year in order to promote the Papal state's power and authority. Dante's setting of his poem in 1300 also serves to remind readers of the themes of internal reflection and want for redemption within the Catholic religion, emphasising that a rejection of the Pope's decisions is correct in the eyes of God, if it is done so through an understanding of God's ultimate power, and the Pope's ultimate humanness (and therefore his ultimate ability to fall into sin).

Love in the Inferno



Figure 3. William Henry O'Connor, *Dante and Beatrice in Heaven* [1859] (Wikimedia Commons).

¹³ Francois P. Retief and Louise Cilliers, 'Diseases and causes of death among the popes', *Acta Theologica*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2006), p. 240.

¹⁴ Jo Ann Heppner Moran, 'Dante, Purgatorio 2, and the Jubilee of Boniface VIII', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 122 (2004), p. 1.

¹⁵ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, Translated by H.F. Cary, (Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 2009), Canto XIX

Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE), the most distinguished Christian theologian of late antiquity, developed a theology of love centred on the soul finding its natural state when it desires the love of God, and acknowledges that all beauty comes from God.¹⁶ This concept is mirrored throughout the *Inferno*, with examples of the wrong type of love (lust, adultery, homosexuality, etc.) being seen as transgressions against God worthy of eternal damnation in Hell, whereas ultimate beauty and love as redemption and worship, is shown as the only true path to Paradiso. In *The Divine Comedy*, this Godly love – love as worship - is demonstrated through the character of Beatrice Portinari, Dante's (unrequited) love, who motivates Dante's entire journey through the circles of Hell and Purgatory, until his eventual reunion with her in Paradiso.¹⁷ Beatrice acts as the personification of the beauty of faith, an idea mirroring Augustan theology, and love as redemption.

The Malebolge: Canto 29 and Canto 30



Figure 4. William Blake, *Geryon Conveying Dante and Virgil Down Towards Malebolge* (Wikimedia Commons).

The 18th Canto marks Dante and Vergil's descent into the eighth circle in the *Inferno*, a circle referred to as Malebolge, a damnation place for fraudsters, organised in a series of 10 bolgias, each one dedicated to a different punishment.¹⁸ This specific area of Hell is especially complicated, as its cylinder like structure descends lower with each bolgia, each housing a different and complex punishment. It is in the 10th Bolgia (Canto 29 - 30), where Dante and Virgil meet Capocchio and Gianni, the two men featured in Bouguereau's *Dante and Virgil in Hell*. Capocchio, introduced in Canto 29,¹⁹ was an alchemist suffering from leprosy, who remarks to Dante that in life he had the ability to turn metal into gold, and mimic animals,

¹⁶ Joseph Anthony Mazzeo, 'Dante's concept of Love', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 18, no. 2 (1957), p. 147.

¹⁷ Dante immortalised Beatrice Portinari in *La Vita Nuova* (The New Life). See R. W. B. Lewis, "Dante's Beatrice and the New Life of Poetry," *New England Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (2001): 69-80.

¹⁸ Ferrante, 'Malebolge as the key to the structure of Dante's *Inferno*', p. 456.

¹⁹ Darby Tench, 'Inferno XXIX', *Lectura Dantis*, no. 6 (1990), p. 374.

specifically an ape.²⁰ Though the conversation between Dante and Capocchio was short and somewhat trivial, the mention of animal-imitation is very significant to the broader theme of sin and redemption in *The Divine Comedy*. This theme in fact transcends the literary bounds of Dante's text, making its way into visual representations of the story, like Bouguereau's painting.²¹ This is the theme of *bestiale*,²² the sin of humans acting as or being akin to an animal, existing without guilt, remorse, or the desire to seek redemption in God. Gianni, on the other hand, acts as a foil to Capocchio, in a sense that he actively, methodically fools his fellow man for his own gain, as opposed to Capocchio, who fools nature and the natural order of things through alchemy (changing metals, mimicking nonhuman animals, etc.). Both men are deceivers, but one deceives the flesh and nature, while the other deceives the mind.²³

The distinction between the human and the animal is at the core of Dante's poem, equating a rejection of God's commandments and the prioritisation of the physical world and the flesh to a rejection of salvation itself, ultimately leading to eternal damnation. This brutalism of the Inferno and the *bestiale* of its residents is represented in Bouguereau's *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, through the fight between Capocchio and Gianni, which acts as the focal point.

Bouguereau's *Dante and Virgil in Hell*, 1850

After three unsuccessful attempts at winning France's *Prix Du Rome* art scholarship, the 25-year-old Bouguereau made the shrewd decision to appeal to the Academy's sense of tradition and affinity for the Renaissance. He turned to depicting a scene from the most sacralised non-religious text in Christian history: *The Divine Comedy*. *Dante and Virgil in Hell* is an 1850s neoclassical oil painting on canvas, currently held in a private collection at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.²⁴ This painting features Dante and Virgil as they make their way through the 8th circle of hell, encountering two men, Capocchio and Gianni, engaged in a violent brawl. Both men are clearly in agony, Gianni biting hard on Capocchio's throat as he rams his knee into his back, forcing him down. Gianni's back is contorted in a dramatic, expressively distorted way, demonstrating his fury and willing violence. Capocchio, on his knees, stares up as if accepting defeat, as he uses his remaining strength to grip onto Gianni's auburn hair, his body captured mid-fall, entirely at the mercy of Gianni, who has his bloody grip on Capocchio's torso and left arm. A third man is seen on the ground, just behind the two men, appearing defeated and possibly wounded, his appearance resembling Capocchio, implying he suffered a similar fate at the hands of Gianni, who, unlike the other two men, has fiery red hair, not brown. This is a definite artistic choice on the part of Bouguereau, not grounded in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

²⁰ 'Inferno 29', *Digital Dante* (2019). At: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/inferno/inferno-29/>.

²¹ See also Leonard Baskin (1922-2000), 'Capocchio and Gianni Schicchi', *Divine Comedy Watercolours* (1969). This artwork was one of 120 illustrations Baskin produced of the *Divine Comedy*. At: <https://www.rmichelson.com/artists/leonard-baskin/divine-comedy-watercolors/>.

²² Richard H. Lansing, 'Dante's concept of Violence and the Chain of Being', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, no. 99 (1981), p. 70.

²³ See also William Blake, 'The Pit of Disease: Gianni Schicchi and Myrrha 1824-27,' *National Gallery of Victoria* (1920). At: <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/collection/international/print/b/blake/ipd00025.html>.

²⁴ 'Dante et Virgile - William Bouguereau', *Musée D'Orsay* (1850). At: <https://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/artworks/dante-et-virgile-153692>.

It helps the viewer identify the physical power imbalance between the two men, distinguished through their hair colour, the fiery red (Gianni) overpowering the dark brown hues (Capocchio and the unidentified man on the floor). The biting imagery, however, is taken directly from the text, when Dante describes Gianni as biting Capocchio at the “knot of the neck.”²⁵ An act also reminiscent of a previous scene in a Canto 24, when the man Ugolino bites into the nape of Ruggieri, in an act of cannibalism, and excessive lust.²⁶ This anthropophagic imagery is a nod to the previously-mentioned theme of bestiality, and the ultimate sin of forgoing anthropocentrism (being made in the likeness of God) and succumbing to the primitive, ungodly desires of the flesh.²⁷

Dante watches the altercation, his arm cautiously resting on Virgil as he shelters behind his guide, Dante’s red coat and hat contrast with Virgil’s white robe, but almost blend into the background, as if he was literally hiding in the painting, cautiously concealing himself while he watches the brawl. He is positioned as a lost observer, at the behest of Virgil’s guidance, his expression focused on the fight, while Virgil’s gaze looks directly ahead, suggesting that he is unmoved by the spectacle. Contextually, Dante’s position as a living human in this narrative, is also demonstrated through his clothing, with vibrant red symbolising his religiosity and search for salvation, and by his curiosity. The hellish, violent torments of the residents in the Inferno are commonplace for Virgil, who is looking elsewhere unbothered, while Dante is watching everything, cautiously, for the first time.

In the background, a demon spreads its wings across the breadth of the painting: he watches Dante and Virgil, his appearance dark and frightening, with bat wings and a horned face, his skin tone blending into the background, absorbing the light.²⁸ The demon iconography compliments the general hellish atmosphere of the painting, transforming an almost homoerotic, Spartan-like fight scene, into a natural occurrence in the place of the tormented, and the home of demons. The demon also has animal qualities – wings and horns – indicating its distance from God. Also, positioned behind the demon is a pile of naked, fighting bodies, entangled in a grotesque display, showing that though Capocchio and Gianni may be the focal point of the painting, all in the Malebolge are damned to experience the same torment.

William Adolphe Bouguereau, the Academic

William Adolphe Bouguereau, born in 1825 in La Rochelle, France, began cultivating his talents as a youth, painting farmers and scenery from the nearby town of Saintonge,²⁹ where he often frequented. He began his formal training at the Académie at the age of 21,³⁰ familiarising himself with the formal techniques of the Neoclassical, developing a staunch ‘Academic’ art style that would go on to define his entire career and legacy. Academic art in nineteenth century

²⁵ Michele Augusto Riva, Iacopo Cesana, Lucio Tremolizzo, Lorenzo Lorusso, Carlo Ferrarese, and Giancarlo Cesana, ‘The neurologist in Dante’s *Inferno*’, *European Journal of Neurology*, vol. 73, nos 5-6 (2015), p. 279.

²⁶ Lansing, *Dante’s concept of Violence and the Chain of Being*, p. 70.

²⁷ Peter Leithart, ‘Incontinence, Malice, Bestiality’, *Theopolis Institute*, 21 October (2016). At: https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/incontinence-malice-bestiality/.

²⁸ Jaime Robles, ‘About the Art: Divine Darkness’, *Psychological Perspectives*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2023), p. 321.

²⁹ ‘The Art of Adolphe William Bouguereau’, *Brush and Pencil*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1905), p. 83.

³⁰ Angelina Diamante, *Bouguereau’s Vampires: Navigating Transgressive Desire in Dante et Virgile*, Masters Thesis (Sotheby’s Institute of Art, 2024), p. 18.

France, was defined by the revitalisation of the classical, focussing on perspective, realism, and precision,³¹ as well as the telling of stories/mythologies through the visual medium. Nevertheless, it would not be until 1876, 26 years after painting *Dante de Virgile* (*Dante and Virgil in Hell*), that Bouguereau would be recognised as a significant contributor to the Academy, gaining lifetime membership until his death in 1905.³² However, though his skills were undoubtedly great, and his dedication to the traditional admirable, Bouguereau's long career in France's art scene was not without its controversies.



Figure 5. William Adolphe Bouguereau, c. 1880 (Wikimedia Commons).

Bouguereau's commitment to tradition made him an antagonistic figure in nineteenth century France's growing trend towards modernism and resentment towards the Academy's inflexible and outdated standards, that enforced the idea that the academic rule was (art) law, and that there was no room for impressionist innovations.³³ This was in part led by the introduction of influential rejectors of the Academy, such as Monet. In fact, Bouguereau would go on to be defined as a rigid traditionalist not only in life, but also long after his death, with harsher critics of his work even going as far as to brand him a skilled yet *brainless* painter, void of originality.³⁴ This was in large part due to his unwavering commitment to the neoclassical, more specifically, the neoclassical tradition of depicting religion and mythology with hyperrealism and perfectly shaped figures, or, alternatively, the occasional peasant girl.

From Dante to Bouguereau: The Religious Bridge between the Medieval and the Neoclassical

³¹ Diamante, *Bouguereau's Vampires: Nativing Transgressive Desire in Dante et Virgile*, p. 16

³² 'William-Adolphe Bouguereau', *The Art Story* (2025). At: <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/bouguereau-william-adolphe/>.

³³ 'The Art of Adolphe William Bouguereau', p. 83.

³⁴ Gerald Ackerman, 'William Bouguereau. Paris', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 126, no. 973 (1984), p. 248.

Late medieval Italy was a quintessentially Catholic Christian society just beginning to understand its mediocrity in the face of the often corrupt and shady Papal states. Though just about all of Europe was overwhelming Christian at the time, Italy, and Florence in particular, held an interesting position, mainly due to notable figures like Dante Alighieri and his outspokenness on ecclesiastical matters, especially regarding the supposed corruption of the Pope and the blasphemous practice of simony. *The Divine Comedy* is more than a mere narrative of adventure and redemption, it is a commentary on the rampant corruption at all levels of the Church at the time, from prominent politicians to actual Popes, it seems Dante was convinced that degeneracy existed within every fabric of Italian society. In many ways the *Inferno* marked the blossoming of a reconsideration of the place and purpose of secular texts in an otherwise overwhelmingly theologically dominated intellectual space. Secular, of course, in a sense that one may view and observe the religiosity of an individual through their work, and perhaps even the religious significance of that work, without claiming the work itself as religious. The Papal states had created an atmosphere that brought into question their ability to overlook ecclesiastical matters with jeopardy for those involved (be it spiritual, monetarily, etc.), and therefore unintentionally created a situation in which *The Divine Comedy* was able to be created and popularised. The irony of the secular utilising religious imagery to create a cosmology in which religious figures are held accountable for their misdeeds, sins. This criticism of the church, though with the leaders of the church and not its teachings, is mirrored and expanded on later during the eighteenth century in France, during the French revolution, and the creation of *Laïcité*.

nineteenth century France saw massive religious shifts after the events of the French Revolution, with movements against the church becoming widespread, and anti-Christian sentiment growing out of the ruins of a once flourishing daughter-of-the-church national identity.³⁵ *Laïcité*, the concept of French secularism, was founded from the revolution, a core aspect of modern French identity being the state's separation from the church. However, though this may be commonplace in prominent aspects of French society in the twenty-first century, Bouguereau lived within a liminal time during the mid-nineteenth century, up until sometime after the turn of the twentieth century, after the revolution and but still during a time in which the Church had overwhelming influence over the country. Although it is contentious to claim that *The Divine Comedy* is an explicitly religious text, nineteenth century French academic artists held it in high regard, just as they did Greek and Roman mythologies. This was because academic artists sought a proximity to the Renaissance and did so through following the tradition of depicting the *Commedia*.³⁶

Conclusion

William Bouguereau's Dante and Virgil bridges the gap between the rapid societal and cultural expansions of Christianity during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, primarily through its

³⁵ Roger Price, *Church and the State in France, 1789-1870* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 175.

³⁶ Diamante, *Bouguereau's Vampires: Nativing Transgressive Desire in Dante et Virgile*, p. 16

religious iconography, but also through its depiction of a secular text that is at its core, a religious narrative. It succeeds in communicating a concise non-scriptural story through its illustrations, whilst allowing the artist to maintain the religiosity of its contents. Bouguereau and Dante work together across timelines, to communicate not only their religious identities, but also the state of religion, tradition, and beauty, in their respective timelines. To Dante, beauty is his representation of God's love and redemption in the Inferno, and to Bouguereau, beauty is what he represents through his depiction of Dante's narrative. Both men continue to be great sources of Western influence and culture, maintaining relevancy throughout the centuries despite the rarely stagnant nature of Christianity in the west, while demonstrating the religious dimensions of secular-texts, and the artworks that depict them.