

Research Paper: Willy Wonka & the Nine Circles of Hell

How does a 14th-century man, a poor boy, and a chocolatier relate to one another?

Around 1321, Dante Alighieri finished writing the *Divine Comedy*. The first section of the poem *Inferno* recounts Dante's journey through *Inferno* led by the poet Virgil as he confronts and refuses to yield to the many vices therein. Centuries later, in 1971, Mel Stuart directed a movie adaptation of Roald Dahl's 1964 book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. The movie was renamed *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, and in this story, Charlie Bucket finds one of five golden tickets. He wins a tour of a chocolate factory owned and operated by Willy Wonka with his Grandpa Joe, five other children, and their parents. *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* is a modern allegory that uses metaphors similar to *Dante's Inferno* with Charlie, a poor young boy who travels through the inferno to reach paradise.

The movie follows Charlie's point of view, and *Dante's Inferno* follows Dante's point of view. As Charlie wins the golden ticket, a mob of adults attacks him. Yet, he gets away and runs home to surprise his family. In *Dante's Inferno*, instead of being attacked by humans, he is "terrorized by three animals. . .it is then that he meets the Latin poet Virgil with whom he continues on his path" (Films On Demand). The following day, Charlie leaves with Grandpa Joe to tour the factory owned by Willy Wonka, who represents Virgil. Charlie gives Wonka his golden ticket to pass the gate and enter the factory. In the *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil "arrive at the river Acheron; and there find the old ferryman Charon, who takes the spirits over to the opposite shore" (Alighieri). They officially enter the Inferno when they pass through its gates.

As Dante and Charlie travel across the new realms, they pass through areas where people reveal their true selves and are punished for the vices they commit. *Dante's Inferno* contains nine

circles of hell, four of which are suitable for the children in the story, barring Charlie. In the chocolate room, “everyone, barring Wonka, Charlie, and Grandpa Joe, [make] absolute pigs of themselves when invited to partake of this eatable universe” (Pulliam 2007). Augustus Gloop is gluttonous in this room, which causes him to be sucked into a chocolate tube. In the third circle, gluttons are punished to “lie in the mire, under a continual and heavy storm of hail snow, and discolored water” (Alighieri). Violet Beauregarde proves treacherous as the story progresses, transforming into a blueberry in the Inventing Room. Next, Veruca Salt is greedy and falls into a vat in the Egg Room. In the fourth circle, those who are greedy, hoarding, and squandering money “are condemned to. . .cursing each other, they roll in opposite directions huge boulders which represent the riches they have ill-acquired or ill-spent in their lifetime” (Films On Demand). Finally, Mike Teavee is obsessed with television, which causes him to shrink in the Wonka Vision studio. Pulliam explains how Willy Wonka could focus on improving children's lives; “Instead, he is more concerned with purity of character, which he tests during the tour” (Pulliam 2007). When children are eliminated, the Oompa Loompas teach another lesson. The Oompa Loompas may represent devils in *Dante's Inferno*. Aside from assisting Willy Wonka in running the factory, they also teach the audience how to remain good people and succeed in life.

Although neither Dante nor Charlie are virtuous, they acknowledge their sins. In *Dante's Inferno*, Beatrice reprehends Dante; he confesses to his lust for her “and falls to the ground. Coming to himself again . . .the three virgins. . .intercede for him with Beatrice, that she would display to him her second beauty” (Alighieri). Dante enters paradise with Beatrice after confessing his sins. Likewise, after Grandpa Joe and Charlie are eliminated for drinking the fizzy lifting drinks, Grandpa Joe wants to sell the gobstopper to Wonka's competitor, Slugworth. However, Charlie proves he's honest by giving Wonka the gobstopper before leaving. Wonka is

delighted by Charlie's actions and deems him the winner of the competition and the heir to the Chocolate Factory. William Schultz indicates that "After Charlie. . .won, Wonka takes [them] into the glass elevator, which rises. . .then explodes . . .through the factory's glass ceiling. . .He finds himself transported into a different realm, with a different perspective, bathed in light" (1998). Similarly, after passing all the circles in the Inferno, Dante earns access to Paradiso, also known as paradise. For Charlie, paradise is a world in which he can feed and care for his family, as they have always taken care of him despite their poverty.

In both stories, love is a recurring theme. Charlie spends his first salary on a loaf of bread for his family and gives the rest to his mother and grandfather to purchase tobacco. Later, Charlie attempts to share a chocolate bar with his family, which he received as a birthday gift, but they all refuse it. Through his unwavering goal of feeding his poor family, Charlie exemplifies the ultimate act of selflessness and compassion. Charlie's love for his family is symbolized by Grandpa Joe's presence during the chocolate factory tour. Likewise, Dante's motivation is his love for Beatrice, traveling through the Inferno to reach her in Paradise, showing his unwavering commitment and dedication.

Charlie and Dante are unaware of what lies ahead, but they follow their guides with faith. Willy Wonka guides Charlie and the other children through the chocolate factory, as he is the only one who knows how to move through the maze-like structure. Similarly, Dante follows Virgil into the Inferno, a place he has never been to. In Dante Alighieri's *Novel the Divine Comedy*, translator Henry F. Cary explains that "The writer. . .is met by Virgil, who promises to show him the punishments of Hell, and afterwards of Purgatory. After the invocation. . . he doubted [his strength] sufficed for the journey. . .but being comforted by Virgil, he. . .took courage, and followed him as his guide" (Alighieri). Virgil and Willy Wonka guide the

protagonists through the domains, ensuring that if they obey the rules, nothing terrible will happen to them.

Having written this, it seems there are numerous variations on *Dante's Inferno* and *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* in our culture. Both stories involve a protagonist who follows a guide into a realm like Inferno. They watch as people are punished for breaking rules and committing vices. While neither is virtuous, they acknowledge their transgressions and still establish their worth through love, honesty, and a deep understanding of what it means to be honorable. People seek to understand what it means to live a good life with virtue and hope for the future. Life may be a classroom experience, but if everyone follows their guides and strives to be virtuous, they might learn valuable lessons about themselves and the world in which they live.

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