



holdings
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Story:

Hell According to the Scholastics **Sem Lala**

Hell is constricted and dark. It is occupied by demons and sinners. It is filled with fire and smoke. The constricting nature of the prison is explicitly designed by God as a form of punishment. On earth, a captive is normally allowed some liberty of movement, even if only within the confines of their prison cell. That's entirely impossible in hell. Everyone is heaped together because there's such a large number of prisoners. They are mounded in rolling heaps across a burning landscape. Moreover, the walls of the prison are said to be approximately 4,000 miles thick. Everyone is so bound and helpless that, as St. Anselm writes, they are not even able to remove from their eyes the worms that continuously eat them. They are in 'exterior darkness.' Hell fire, being a special kind of fire, doesn't emanate light. It burns but doesn't glow. It generates constant smoke. The prisoners are afforded no air circulation. Moreover, the smell is extremely repulsive. All decomposing organic material is to be redirected here at the end of the world. The bodies of the prisoners themselves exhale such extreme smell that, as St. Bonaventure writes, one of them suffices to contaminate the world. Imagine a rotting body that liquifies and continues to decay while burning. Now multiply it by several billion which are all placed in a confined space. The burning is terrible and excruciating. Fire on earth is designed by God for utility, while fire in hell is designed for punishment. It doesn't destroy, on the contrary, it preserves the body of the prisoners while burning it. Hell fire burns in chain reactions without end point or limit. There's no base and no direction. It is said that a mountain is dropped into the fire and vanishes like wax thrown into the surface of the sun. The same fire proliferates inside each prisoner. It irradiates organs from the inside. The mechanisms of this terrible punishment are irreducible to physics and in order to get a sense of the immense breadth of the punishment enacted in hell, we need to consider the theological implications of a fire that acts both on soul and body. The sensuous experience of the sinners is flooded with suffering. Every form of perception is afflicted by pain. A sinner sees only their burning retina, and tastes only the decomposition of their own flesh. The soul is completely registered into the body. There is no space for abstract thought and no distance from pain. The experience of thought itself is painful because for the sinners each thought is a cut.



Photos:

Zanne Chaudhry

This immense suffering, more importantly, eradicates the possibility of any social bond from the outset. There is no solidarity in hell. There are no family units, no fraternity, no sense of community. All identifying markers disappear, and everyone is reduced to a base unalterable form of life that, stripped from any form of right, simply suffers. Everyone is divided by suffering. The prisoners experience the bodies of others with constant rage. The only constant social link is the persistent anger and fear that the sinners have for one another. All they do is scream and insult each other. In other words, the only binding social link is mutual resentment. Repentance is no longer an option and everyone is at a constant limit. Their screams fill even the most remote corners of the vast abyss. The demons, moreover, never help. They afflict the sinners in two ways: by their presence, which is ugly and intolerable, and by their reproaches. Sometimes they narrate the suffering of sinners in a condescending way. They narrate what they observe and ask questions. They ask: “God spoke to you in many voices, why did you not hear?” They continue: “You would not crush out that pride and anger in your heart, you would not restore those ill-gotten goods, you would not obey the precepts of your holy church nor attend to your religious duties, you would not abandon those wicked companions, you would not avoid those dangerous temptations.” The language of the demons is hateful and disgusting. Nonetheless, the demons themselves are disgusted by the sinners, because the sin of the devils is considered an intellectual sin compatible with angelical nature, on the other hand, human sin defiles the temple of the Holy Ghost, and moreover, defiles and pollutes human nature itself.¹

1. I was reading *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when I stumbled on Joyce’s dazzling description of hell. After looking into it, it turned out that he lifted it from a medieval manuscript. I always liked that about Joyce. I should mention that he took some liberties. I decided to lift his lifting. I took some liberties too. The result is this text.



