

'The Last Judgment' by Jan van Eyck.  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.  
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# WHY, THIS IS HELL

The infernal regions permeate the world of *Macbeth*. Farah Karim-Cooper explores some of the changing ideas about Hell and its associations.

Perceptions of Hell in Shakespeare's time were complex and varied, but it is clear that the *idea* of Hell was an evolving one and by the time Shakespeare was writing *Macbeth*, there were multiple representations with roots in Classical, Biblical and medieval ideas. An examination of these written and illustrated accounts shows that there were several identifiable themes dominating representations of Hell: it is punitive; the punishment is appropriate to or reflects the sin; the graphic nature of the descriptions is designed to provoke religious fear and great emphasis is placed upon physical and psychological pain.

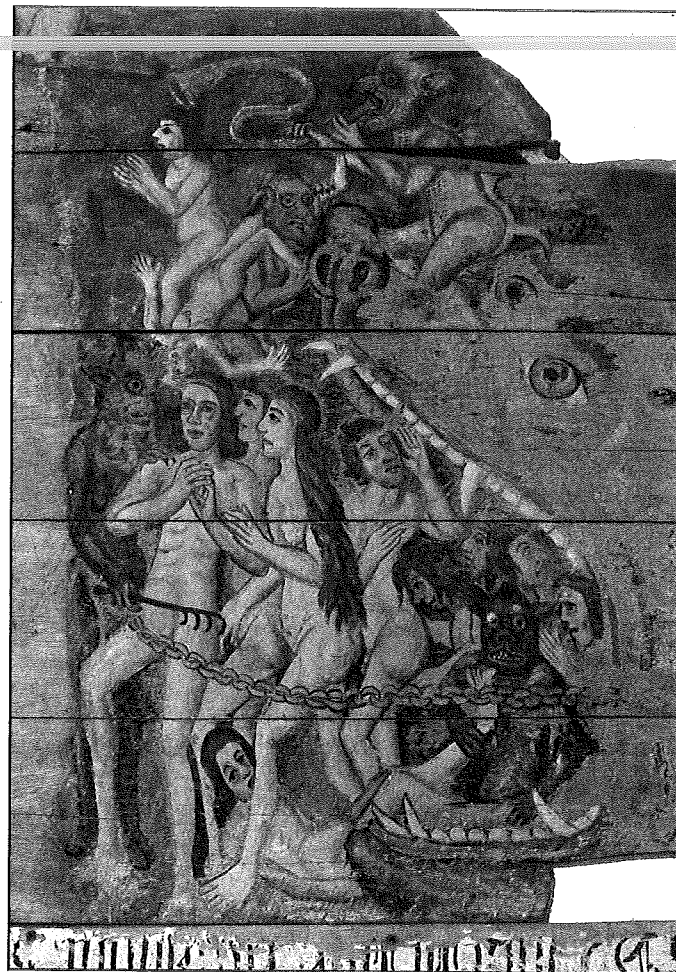
The idea of Hell had been around in the pre-Christian era and many Renaissance texts that depict it draw from the vivid, sometimes grotesque accounts of the underworld or Hades to be found in the writings of Homer, Plato and Virgil. Plato's description of Tartarus, the region of the underworld to which sinners are sent, had a lasting impact on writers such as Dante, Shakespeare and Milton. Plato writes that those 'who have committed many and terrible deeds of sacrilege, murder foul and violent or the like—are hurled into Tartarus which is their suitable destiny, and they never come out'. For the ancient Greeks, Tartarus

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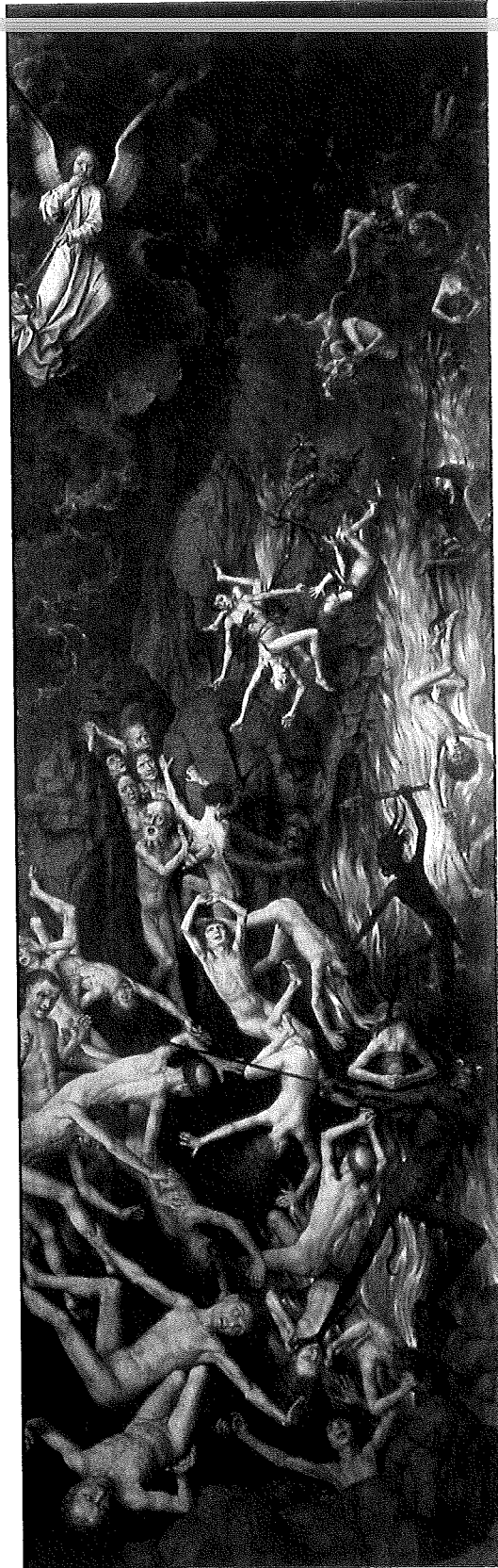


The hell mouth from the Doom painting at St Peter's Church, Wenham, Suffolk, c.1480. Topfoto

was a punitive environment and provided a precedent for the view that the punishment should suit the sin. The Roman poet Virgil created perhaps the first vivid idea of this region in *The Aeneid*, in which he sets the scene with rivers of 'torrent flames', the 'sound of moaning' and noxious fumes. Virgil's descriptions show a keen awareness that the threat of an everlasting punishment could have far more impact if it was related in terms of sight, sound and smell.

Early Christian theology contributed significantly to establishing conventions for describing hell. St. Augustine referred to Hell as a 'lake of fire and brimstone', designating it as a place of torment.

Biblically, of course, the overpowering trope is fire, and, as described in Mark, 9.45, it is a 'fire that shall never be quenched'. Other passages threaten sinners with being hurled into a furnace, where the clamour of 'wailing' and 'gnashing of teeth' (Matthew, 13.50) can be heard. From the Bible were drawn countless dramatizations in mystery cycles, paintings, woodcuts, poems, sermons and narratives of episodes in which Satan and his demons are spectacularly portrayed preying upon the souls of sinners with a colourful array of tortures at their disposal. Among some of these episodes were images of the Last Judgment, a popular theme amongst artists throughout Europe in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Referred



Detail of the descent into Hell in a panel from 'The Last Judgement' of 1473, by Hans Memling. Courtesy of Muzeum Narodowe, Gdansk. Bridgeman Art Library

to in medieval liturgical poetry as *dies irae*, the 'day of wrath', the last judgment was prefigured as the moment when justice would finally be done. Painters such as Jan van Eyck, Hieronymus Bosch, Hans Memling and Michelangelo created terrifying portraits of this moment with naked sinners tumbling down into a burning hell, their bodies lashed, impaled or eaten by demons. Other Medieval visions of Hell, such as William Caxton's 1480 translation of a French vision, portray it as a 'pytte of fyre. . .ful of alle stenche and of sorrowes'.

One of the most famous, influential and inventive of all depictions can be found in Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, an allegorical fiction describing the poet's journey through Hell ('Inferno'), Purgatory ('Purgatorio') and Heaven ('Paradiso'). In the 'Inferno', Hell has a complex geography consisting of nine circles. Dante assigns a different sin to each level, with the ninth reserved for traitors, treachery being the worst conceivable sin. In this circle stands Cocytus, a lake of ice, where each group of betrayers is encased; within it lie four levels, with, at the very bottom, Satan himself, who is waist deep; perpetually weeping and beating his six wings, he attempts to escape his everlasting imprisonment. He is imagined as a hairy monster with three heads consuming in each of his mouths the vilest of traitors: Judas, Brutus and Cassius. The Globe's production of *Macbeth* draws its inspiration from the 19th-century artist, Gustave Doré's interpretation of Dante's 'Inferno', and explores the notion that treachery is the most heinous crime.

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In post-Reformation England, Hell evolves further and becomes increasingly complex and multi-faceted, both philosophically and representationally. The 17th-century English playwright, Thomas Heywood reinforces and extends the old idea of Hell when he writes in *The Hierarchie of the Blessed Angels* (1635): 'In Hell is Griefe, Paine, Anguish, and Annoy'. Linking the pains of Hell to the senses, Heywood continues:

The Sight with Darknesse, and the Smel with  
Stinke;  
The Taste with Gall, in bitterness extreme;  
The Hearing, with their Curses that blasphemie:  
The Touch with Snakes & Todes crawling about  
them,  
Afflicted both within and without them.

Key to post-Reformation descriptions is the presentation of Hell as a metaphor. Protestant writers spoke of Hell dichotomously; no longer just a place, it becomes also a condition that afflicts the mind and the conscience – what Heywood refers to above as both 'within and without'. In Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, Faustus asks Mephistopheles how he could leave Hell, to which he answers: 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it'. Equally, in the mid-Jacobean period, Thomas Tuke, in his *Discourse of Death* says it is not easy to say precisely where Hell is located, but that it exists, 'is cleere enough'. Milton's *Paradise Lost* explores the mental condition of Hell's inhabitants, providing a direct parallel for the type of psychological pain that Adam and Eve would later experience. Milton's Satan articulates the poet's exploration of an 'inner hell': 'Which way I flie is Hell, myself am Hell'.

When we consider *Macbeth*, it is this concept of an inner hell that seems the most interesting. The symbolism in the play is replete with images of fiends, witchcraft and devils; Hell is omnipresent in the play. But Hell is also a state of mind. We witness Macbeth's decline into a personal Hell, a tormenting chasm of sleeplessness and psychological anguish, while simultaneously, the world around him becomes increasingly infused with the dark projections of his mind. His terrifying and phantasmagoric visions are compounded by the darker forces that Shakespeare, or perhaps Thomas Middleton (author of some of the witchcraft scenes), injected into the world of the play. The post-Reformation Hell, Shakespeare's hell, is, as Macbeth discovers, both 'within and without'.

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