

Adam Scheffler – The Underworld

Why I Love Teaching This Course

I'm fascinated by the topic of hell because it provides us with a vivid dramatization of and way of thinking [about our fear of death](#). But I'm also fascinated with it because it sparks conversations about suffering, empathy, justice, and punishment. The idea that certain people deserve to be punished forever is an appealing one to human beings, especially when we are confronted with others who have committed terrible acts. But it's an idea that's troubling and has always been challenged. Even some major Christian theologians (e.g. Origen) thought that the damned should eventually get to leave hell behind, and Christian writers like [Dante were, in spite of themselves, compelled to pity the damned](#). This issue then leads into contemporary secular debates about whether there are cases in which people should be blackballed from society or put in prison for life (a version of hell), or whether rehabilitation should be the goal.

Hell also often produces empathy for the people who suffer there – just as it did for Dante. And as theorist Rachel Falconer [points out](#), in modern times, when people who are suffering – from mental illness, from homelessness, from cancer or from any other grievous problem – say they are 'in hell,' they don't mean that they think they deserve to be there. Rather, they're simply trying to find language that's up to the task of expressing how much pain they are in. Hence, as we'll discuss, though hell is in and of itself a concept full of violence and terror, in modern secular culture it often becomes a means of accessing empathy – of giving us the tools to do a slightly better job of imagining [how much other people suffer](#), and in this way, strangely, the concept of hell becomes deeply humane.

There are many other things I find fascinating about this subject. I love how flexible the concept of hell is and how many different imaginative forms, genres, and mediums it turns up in from poetry, novels, films, and paintings, to science fiction, TV, [heavy metal](#), [musicals](#), [music videos](#), [comic books](#), and [videogames](#). Hell texts then provide the opportunity to practice thinking as seriously about popular media as one might do about art or literary texts. I also value how the idea of hell gives us an opportunity to see how imagination need not be a means of escapism, but can actually be a means of facing the real world more fully. Along those lines, for the final paper in this class, students pick [a vivid imagining of hell](#) in a contemporary text, and then demonstrate how hell in that text is a metaphor for and means of grappling with a particular real-world problem (like global warming or corrupt law firms).

In my experience, the topic of hell is both serious and strangely fun: it provides an opportunity to discuss canonical literature, death, punishment, and empathy, but it *also* turns up in excellent [comedies](#), [tweets](#), and [buzzfeed quizzes](#), and gives me an excuse to dress up as Satan for a special class. In fact, another important aspect of hell is how it wins people over: the religious Christian poet Milton famously ends up on Satan's side in spite of himself, and hell often has something darkly and perversely fascinating, and even appealing, about it. So I hope you'll join me in giving hell a chance!

–Adam Scheffler