

"Contrasting Representations of Guidance in Medieval and Post-Modern Literature"

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Chapter One: Introduction

What is guidance, and what does one mean when they speak of it? The intention of this project is to think about how guidance manifests itself in literature. Specifically, through an exploration of “guide” figures, analyzing how a central character who is not the protagonist of a story shapes the events that take place, as well as the ideas put forth in the text. Using two texts from distant time periods, Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* (written around 1308) and Percival Everett's *I Am Not Sydney Poitier* (published in 2009), the aim is to explore the similarities and differences that exist between guiding figures in these stories, and what this says about different literary aspirations.

Guides are figures who accompany the protagonist along their path, and although there is not as much narrative focus on them as the protagonist, they are central to the understanding of the text. In *Inferno*, Virgil is the guide of Dante the Pilgrim. Virgil accompanies Dante through his descent into Hell, explaining the context and characters encountered in each circle as they progress. He subsequently guides him through Purgatory in the second volume of *The Divine Comedy* before reuniting Dante with his beloved, Beatrice, who guides him through Heaven. Virgil is a totalizing, authoritative guide figure. His presence invokes not only the tradition of epic poetry Dante wrote in, but also the authority of the Roman Empire. Virgil, in his life's actions and works, embodies what Dante aspires to be, and Dante's inclusion of him shows his own aspiration to capture a place in the same poetic tradition.

In comparison, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* has no one main guide, but, rather, a series of failed guides. If there is one person to designate as the primary guide, it would be the professor of nonsense, who happens to share the same name as the author. Professor Everett occupies a

place of authority, but does not act as an authoritative figure. In fact, he goes out of his way to dismiss his educational authority, as well as the institutions around him. He does indeed guide the protagonist, Not Sidney, but in a roundabout, non-traditional way.

The exploration of guide figures allows one to explore other aspects related to the creation and presentation of literature beyond the plot. For example, theories of authorship, representation of the self, and ideological defenses can all be considered in light of how guidance manifests itself. In the case of Dante, he places himself as the first-person "I" of the story. The choice of naming the protagonist after himself creates a continuity between author and self (Although Dante the Poet and Dante the Pilgrim are not the same person). In the case of Everett, he includes himself in the ensemble, not placing himself at the forefront as Dante did. The choice of naming the professor after himself, and the actions taken by the character creates a more subversive, non-glorifying representation of the self.

Before diving into the particulars of each text, it is worth generally thinking about what is meant when guidance is discussed. Is a guide one who facilitates a mental journey, a physical or geographical exploration, or some combination of the two? This criteria informs who and what can be considered a guide. For example, a physical journey places the likes of a pilot or taxi driver as guiding figures. However, this standard falls short because one does not automatically gain insight by traveling from point A to point B. On the other hand, if guidance is defined strictly within a realm of mental explorations, then teachers, entertainers, and other thought-stimulating performers can be considered guides. It appears that the most fruitful guides come about from a combination of these two factors. A "real-world" example of this could be a museum guide, who leads one through a physical space of a gallery while also mentally engaging

the group through discussion of the artwork seen. Both texts in this paper meet the criteria for a guide facilitating a physical and mental journey. Virgil guides Dante through Hell, and along the way, teaches him about the sins that land each person in their respective circles. Professor Everett engages with indirect guidance while Not Sidney is in college, and later ventures to Alabama to help Not Sidney amidst a series of unexpected events that ensue.

There are multiple examples of guides in literature one can reference who take people on physical and/or mental journeys. The broadest of these is the act of narration itself. The concept of narration is inherently based in guidance, for narration is a textual effect created by an author that allows a story and its characters to come to life, as well as move the reader from scene to scene. However, narration is generally removed from engaging with the direct action of the story. It is not ‘physically’ involved, only serving as a mediation, which limits its role to a ‘mental’ one. The inclusion of a participating guide figure can be seen as a human embodiment of the narrating function; a character that explains incidents as they occur and helps move the action from scene to scene.

The following is a series of examples of guides who meet the aforementioned criteria of leading people on both a physical and mental journey in literature and media: Golem (Sméagol) from *Lord of the Rings*, who brings Frodo to Mordor while inadvertently teaching him a valuable lesson about power and greed; Yoda, of *Star Wars*, who navigates Luke through the swamps of Dagobah while also teaching him the ways of the force; Randall McMurphy from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, who takes the inmates fishing and helps Chief Bromden escape the ward, all while teaching the inmates about the weight of stigma; Jim and Huck in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, as mutual guides to each other as they move down the Mississippi River

away from the racial philosophies that govern their society. All of these are valid examples of guiding figures, but for the purposes of in-depth comparison, they fall short relative to the stark contrast seen between the Medieval authority embodied in Dante's work, and the Post-Modern fracturing seen in Everett's novel.

It is worth considering how different forms of literature display elements of guidance: for example, plays. Plays are situations where there is usually no overt narrator (an exception would include a play such as *Our Town*, which experiments with theatrical confines and form). Generally speaking, the audience deduces a narration through the actions and dialogue of the actors on the stage. However, an examination of Shakespeare's work reveals a few guides at work on the stage. One example would be Puck in *Midsummer's Nights Dream*. Puck can be considered a guide in the way they facilitate interactions between characters in a sly fashion. However, the primary example that comes to mind resides in *The Tempest*. Here, Prospero and Ariel, also with magical capabilities like Puck, lead Ferdinand on his journey through the island, while helping him better understand himself in the process. Their instruction can be seen as guidance in the development of the self that works as a prerequisite towards the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. Considering this was one of Shakespeare's later plays, it is entirely possible that the inclusion of a guide figure was a means of expanding his methods of representing characters outside of monologue and dialogue.

What about malicious or playful guides, such as Carroll's Cheshire Cat? Can they be considered a guide, or is a separate name required? If one considers the Robert Frost Poem "Directive" a similar question is asked about "let[ting] a guide direct you / Who only has at heart your getting lost" (Frost, ll 8-9). If a guide is not seeking to bring you to a place, especially a

place one seeks to reach, are they still a guide, or merely a sort of prankster? On the other hand, what if getting lost is part of the process? What if getting lost is the only way one can truly understand themselves or the world around them? What if one has to first descend the rabbit hole in order to escape it?

If there are this many guides that one can reference, what makes the guides in these two texts special? These texts stand in for two divergent forms of guidance, and bring into question broader issues relating to form and ideology. Hundreds of years passed between the writing of the two texts, and with that, many societal shifts and developments. The guide figures provide a venue for concretizing these shifts and developments. There are implicit ideological defenses that are embedded in these texts. In the case of Dante, the entire *Divine Comedy* is grappling with a Medieval Christian worldview. Although Dante both defends and critiques the composite elements, he affirms a belief in structure and order as a means of understanding the world. In comparison, *I am Not Sidney Poitier* is written in a Post-Modern context, with steadfast concepts such as truth and language interrogated and reduced to competing claims of relativity. The fractured representation of guidance seen in this text stands in for the real-world fracturing of the Post-Modern landscape.

It is also worth considering how institutional boundaries affect guidance. For example, how genuine can the guidance of a teacher be if everyone is forced to go to school? What would separate guidance from mere learning in the education system? How about the military: how genuine can the guidance of a drill Sergeant be if the whole military hierarchy is based off of obedience and adherence to authority? Is the reception to the instruction genuine, or one of fear? It appears that reciprocity would be the one word answer here. Guidance is different from mere

instruction in the sense that the guide wants to impart help, and the one being guided wants to be helped. There are elements of willingness and agency that separate guidance from instruction or command.

In the broader commercial and cultural realm, industries such as publishing houses of history textbooks and literary anthologies affect how the public's thoughts are guided through history, or how a population deems what is an important or great work. These institutional systems are guides for important facets of daily life, such as education, entertainment, and cultural preservation. There is an implicit stating and confirmation of values when certain historical events or particular types of poems are focused upon.

A concluding question to ask concerns how religious figures and texts are viewed in the context of guidance. This is especially important because the two texts have opposite views on God: Dante as a firm believer, as compared to Everett writing in a completely secular realm. For example, is the voice of God like the omniscient voice of the narrator, or a character made present through narration? This depends on whether one sees religious writers speaking on behalf of God or whether they are putting forth what they believe God to be. In terms of the Old Testament, are the prophetic figures guides? Someone like Moses, who not only leads his people out of Egypt, but helps establish tenets of Judaism in the process, appears to fit the established criteria of a guide. This differs from prophets who simply profess, and guide with their thoughts; someone like Amos, who stays within his city, warning the citizens of the consequence of their transgressions. Is Jesus a guide, with his sermons gathering crowds to follow him up hills, delivering messages that are setting the stage for a whole separate monotheistic sect? How about

the followers, such as apostles or priests, who proceed in the wake of these figures? They serve as guiding mediation between the divine and the secular - do they count as well?

Chapter Two: Authoritative Guidance and Tradition in Dante's *Inferno*

Note on translation:

This project uses Mark Musa's translation of *Inferno*. This choice is motivated by the translator maintaining the *terza rima* structure of three line stanzas, minus the interlocking rhymes found in the original Italian. By using "rhymeless iambic pentameter, that is blank verse" Musa avoids constraining his translation to a rhyme scheme while maintaining a poetic tone (Musa 61). Musa is instead free to choose words that most accurately correspond to the original writing of Dante. This choice avoids "the difficulty imposed by the continual mechanical necessity of finding rhyme, good or bad," where "the translator is often forced to use a diction that is aesthetically unacceptable, or even contrary to the spirit of the language" (Musa 62). These "aesthetically unacceptable" choices could lead to vowels or consonants that do not match on the level of poetic stresses or words that do not fit in terms of diction. As he says: "Iambic pentameter is a beautiful, flexible instrument, but only when the translator is freed from preoccupation with rhyme" (Musa 64). These choices reflect the broader question of how one approaches translation: whether the translator should be most loyal to the original word choice, the spirit of the language, the form, or some combination of these.

Close Reading of Canto I

Dante's *Inferno* is the first of three parts that constitute *The Divine Comedy*, a journey through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven by Dante the Pilgrim. Dante the Pilgrim is not to be

confused or conflated with the author Dante Alighieri. “Dante the Poet” is a historical figure, whereas “Dante the Pilgrim” is the character in the poems. Translator Mark Musa cautions that “We [as readers] must attempt, just as we must do in the case of any first person novel, to distinguish between the point of view of the one who has already lived through the experiences recorded and has had time to reflect upon them, and the point of view of the one undergoing the experiences at the time” (Musa 21). This may be difficult if the main character has the same name as the author, but the distinction between the character who undergoes the experience one reads about must be looked at separately from the author who fashions the story from a removed place of hindsight. This distinction avoids over-ascribing motivations and decisions of the author to the character, and vice-versa.

The Inferno is made up of 34 cantos. The first canto is an introduction to both the descent and the journey through Hell. In a way, it functions as an introduction not just to this volume, but to the whole trilogy. This essential exposition merits an in-depth exploration. Here, the reader is introduced to the main figures of Dante the Pilgrim and his guide, Virgil. The reader is acclimated to Dante's mental state at the beginning of the journey, and learns some of the motivations for undertaking this experience. The events leading up to Dante's first contact with his guide are also explained. The canto closes with the two beginning their journey together. The opening lines position Dante as one who is lost, which creates an understanding that he must undergo a journey. One is especially in need of a guide if they are lost and traveling through unfamiliar realms, both of space and mind. Dante begins by stating “Midway along the journey of our life / I woke to find myself in a dark wood / For I had wandered off from the straight path” (Canto I, ll 1-3). Here, Dante is tying his journey to the journey all must take through the use of

the plural pronoun “our life” (Canto I, 1). The journey in the story is his journey, but the experience and the message is applicable to all. Dante was writing before the popularity of “everyman” stories in literature, but he presents the same idea. The title of “everyman” can be traced to a late 15th century morality play, *The Summoning of Everyman*, and can be seen in early novels such as *Pilgrims Progress* as well as more contemporary novels, such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The Everyman character is also a common trope in other forms, such as television, seen in characters such as Jim from “The Office” and Homer Simpson of “The Simpsons.” The Everyman serves as a kind of blank slate who the audience identifies with more easily than a character with particular or eccentric traits.

Dante finds himself “in a dark wood,” which creates a geographical literalness to his wayward state (Canto I, 2). Dante’s writing is deeply indebted to and influenced by the imagery of The Bible, and it is clear that he is taking a cue here. A common biblical trope uses light to represent God; for example, Jesus' proclamation that “I am the light of the world. Anyone who follows me will not be walking in dark, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12). For Dante to find himself in darkness implies he exists in a state away from God and salvation. He positions himself in darkness to literalize this mental state. He clarifies this waywardness when he says “I had wandered off from the straight path” (Canto I, 3). “The straight path” is the path of piety. The word choice of wandering implies the choice was unintentional, that one day Dante realized he was in this state, as opposed to an intentional going off or straying from the path.

Dante is traumatized by the state of darkness he exists in. He tells the reader his difficulty in recollecting this state: “How hard it is to tell what it was like / this wood of wilderness, savage and stubborn / (the thought of it brings back all my old fears)” (Canto I, ll 4-6). He is unable to

say what “it was like” (Canto I, 4). In fact, the ambiguity of “it” shows that he struggles to define what “it” even is. Is it the woods he is speaking of, as a physical place of trauma, or is it the way the woods made him feel? By describing the woods as “savage and stubborn,” he invokes language of neglect and abandon, like that of his spiritual state at the onset of the journey (Canto I, 6). The environment takes on the same state he is in. Dante emphasizes how traumatic the state is, even from a place of hindsight. Throughout the course of *Inferno*, there are interjections that call attention to the trauma of the experience.

The ambiguity of these lines brings into question the possibilities and problems of representation. Dante faces the linguistic limitations of representation. He struggles to fully capture the reality of his experience. It is not a failure of the concept of language (a notion explored by Everett in *I am Not Sidney Poitier*) as much as it is a failure of the language Dante has at hand. The entire *Divine Comedy* is interested in metaphor and figurative representation that points to reality, that attempts to capture reality even if it fails. This ultimately points to a faith that the language prevails (as opposed to language endlessly circling around itself). The journey that Dante undergoes provokes fear in him, but he stresses the necessity of the journey. The limbo he is in brings forth more fear than death itself; existing in a state of uncertainty brings about more fear than the certainty of death. This means of thinking points to a steadfast belief in order; however fearful this situation may be, the state of uncertainty provides a strong motivation for undergoing a journey to a state of a more defined existence. The desire for a point of conclusive certainty is seen when he states that “But if I would show the good that came out of it / I must talk about things other than the good” (Canto I, ll 8-9). Here, he alludes to the success of his journey, his reaching of paradise and salvation. He knows that he “must talk

about things other than the good” so the reader understands what he went through in order to succeed (Canto I, 9). By recounting the difficulties of the journey and not just the success, Dante guides the reader through a more complete lesson on salvation. If only the beauty of heaven was presented, one would not understand the depths that must first be traversed in order to attain such a state. The focus on the dark and gruesome also points to a readerly affection towards the less savory sides of life; the entire career of Edgar Allan Poe, as well as the staggering number of murder-mystery novels and television shows testify to this affinity for horror. There is a higher register of emotional intensity in darkness, and people are more likely to feel compelled by the end message after riding such an emotional rollercoaster.

Confusion and ambiguity are motifs found throughout *Inferno*. These are the two main adjectives one could use to describe the state of the Pilgrim at the start of his journey. An example of this is seen when he states: “How I entered there I cannot truly say / I had become so sleepy at the moment / When I first strayed, leaving the path of truth” (Canto I, ll 10-12). There is a mixing of past (“entered”) and present (“cannot”) tense in the opening line of this *terza*, suggesting a lack of explanation, even after the journey is done and the situation is recalled in writing. The use of “sleepy” falls in line with the canonical imagery of darkness as a means of representing one away from God: for example, “He [Jesus] came back to the disciples and found them sleeping” (Matthew 26:40). In this example, Jesus has gone to pray and asks the disciples to stay awake; they are unable to do so. Allegorically, this was a test of their faith, which they failed; for, if they cannot stay vigilant for one hour, how are they to do such when he has ascended and gone forever? In this vein, Dante has fallen asleep and has left “the path of truth,” the path of repentance and redemption (12). The word choice of “truth” is important here, for

"truth" is often associated with both spiritual and factual accuracy in both religious and philosophical discourses.

In a fashion similar to the opening *terza*, the next *terza* stresses the suddenness of Dante finding himself in a place away from God, both mentally and geographically. He finds himself (again, without explanation) "at the foot of a hill / at the edge of the wood's beginning, down in the valley / where I first felt my heart plunged deep in fear" (Canto I, ll 13-15). Here, Dante uses geography to symbolically reinforce the mental state of his faith. He is at "the foot of a hill" and "down in the valley," depicting him at the beginning of the journey (Canto I, ll 13-14). He is in the depths, in a place where he has to ascend, and he is scared of this prospect. However, the promise of salvation is seen in "the hilltop shawled / In the morning rays of light sent from the planet / that leads men straight ahead on every road" (Canto I, ll 16-18). The light is present, but it is cloaked in the mountain. The light guides one away from a crooked path of darkness, functioning as a sort of "everyman's light."

Light is a comfort in the darkness for Dante, and this is seen not only in the first canto, but throughout *The Inferno*. The sight of light provides a sense of comfort. Light, in a way, functions as a non-verbal guide motivating the Pilgrim throughout their journey. Dante knows there is an end goal to be reached, despite the distance he must initially traverse. Before attempting to ascend the hill, Dante crafts an essential metaphor comparing himself to a swimmer coming to shore after being lost in the water:

Just as a swimmer, still with panting breath
 Now safe upon the shore, out of the deep
 Might turn for one last look at the dangerous waters

So I, although my mind was turned to flee,
 Turned round to gaze once more upon the pass
 That never let a living soul escape.

(Canto I, ll 22-27)

Dante, although “safe upon the shore” and out of the woods, knows his journey will be long and difficult, but believes it is possible (Canto I, 23). Not only does he believe it to be possible, but he sees it as inevitable, for it “never let[s] a living soul escape” (Canto I, 27). All must take this journey, even if their mind is “turned to flee” (Canto I, 25). The Everyman must make the Every-journey, as it were.

This passage alludes to the Bible, as well as foreshadow the arrival of Virgil via an invocation of *The Aeneid*. Scholar Robert Hollander, in his article “Dante's Use of Aeneid I in Inferno I and II,” suggests that the opening of the first canto, with a pilgrim in the dark woods and the metaphor of a swimmer in a flood, harkens back to the Fall and the Flood, two of the first events in the Bible. Hollander also connects this “temporarily unwilling hero” to Aeneas, the protagonist of *The Aeneid* “as one who will take a journey to a vision in the afterworld, he will in fact be a new Aeneas” (Hollander 147). This is an accurate assessment. Two of Dante’s biggest influences are the Bible and Virgil, and alluding to both works early on creates a subtle homage. Hollander continues by asking, of the Pilgrim, “is it not tacitly true also that as one who has lost the true way, in his immediate surroundings, bewildered, fearful, lost, he is like Adam and Aeneas?” (Hollander 148). The way that Dante has found himself off a path of piety is similar to Aeneas finding himself “blown off course by the storm which initiates the present action of the

poem concerning his voyage” (Hollander 148). It is important to note and see how Dante takes influence in terms of content from Virgil, and how he deftly incorporates this into his own work.

Another point of similarity can be seen when Dante reaches the base of the mountain, and Aeneas reaches the shores of Carthage. Here, they both fling themselves towards the land: “the sea...the exhausted survivors, the shore with a cliff above it, the proximity of death by drowning - all these are common to both scenes” (Hollander 150). In addition, “both heroes, having arrived in a strange and frightening new landscape, begin by climbing upward in order to discover a way out of their present conditions at the brink of death” (Hollander 150). Here, the brink of death is literal for Aeneas, while it is figurative for Dante. However, both writers use a geographical ascension to parallel the start of their internal journey. Dante takes an idea presented by Virgil and builds upon it in his own fashion.

There are challenges that Dante must face before he even enters Hell. Despite the description of the mountain slope as "barren," which suggests a space free to be climbed, he encounters trouble in the form of three wild animals that block the path (Canto I, 29). The first is “a leopard, trim and very swift! / It was covered in a pelt of many spots” (Canto I, ll 32-33). The Pilgrim cannot pass this beast, for, “everywhere I looked, the beast was there / blocking my way, so time and time again / I was about to turn and go back down” (Canto I, ll 34-36). The swiftness of this leopard surpasses any speed the pilgrim has, which leaves him extremely discouraged. The only thing that prevents his quitting is the light, “the sun climbing up with those same stars / that had accompanied it on the worlds first day” (38-9). Here, Dante alludes to the creation story in Genesis, where God first creates the light, and then the creatures of the world. The light surpasses all, and is thus encouragement. The light of redemption can glean rays of hope amidst

the danger that the Pilgrim faces, and highlights the role the light plays throughout the story. The light, as the first of god's creations, is a persistent guide the pilgrim strides after.

Each beast that subsequently appears scares Dante more than the previous one, compounding his fear into sheer terror. The second beast appears in the form of a lion. The lion has its "head raised high and furious with hunger" (Canto I, 47). There is a palpable aura of fear in the presence of this beast; even "the air around him seemed to fear his presence" (Canto I, 48). The fear is supplemented shortly thereafter when a she-wolf appears, "racked with every kind of greediness" (Canto I, 50). This she-wolf "brought my spirit down so low / with fear that seized me at the sight of her, / I lost all hope of going up the hill" (Canto I, ll 52-54). The pilgrim maintained their hope of ascending in the face of one beast, but the combination of the three is too much. This fear is different than his earlier fear, for the threat of wild beasts is more tangible than that of the wild woods or a wayward spiritual state.

There is debate over what these animals represent. According to the footnotes of Mark Musa's translation, the animals were initially seen by scholars as three specific sins: lust, pride and avarice. Musa argues that in addition to this, they can broadly represent divisions of Hell: The leopard represents Fraud, the lion represents Violence, and the she-wolf represents Concupiscence or Incontinence (Musa 73). By presenting the beasts as representatives of entire circles and not specific sins, the scope of their symbolic power is more vast. By presenting them before the pilgrim enters the realms of Hell, they foreshadow what he will encounter.

Robert Hollander, in his article "Dante's Use of Aeneid I in Inferno I and II" makes the claim that this scene is another invocation of *The Aeneid*, comparing the encounter to one where Aeneas encounters three stags upon the shores of Carthage. Both heroes must confront a trio of

animals at the start of their journey. The situations are identical, but the meanings are opposite: the beasts in *The Aeneid* are hunted, whereas the beasts in *The Inferno* pursue and attempt to hunt the Pilgrim, blocking his path. These beasts are “inedible though morally significant...the triad of animals common to both narratives is surely striking” (Hollander 150). Here, Dante takes a ritualistic practice (hunting) and flips it, making the hunter the hunted. Being hunted by animals that represent sin adds a layer of spiritual symbolism to the situation as well.

Hollander draws a second point of comparison and inspiration, one found in a biblical text. The book of Jeremiah mentions a lion, leopard, and wolf punishing sinners. This provides an even more explicit source for the placement of the beasts in *The Inferno*: “Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a wolf of the evenings shall spoil them, a leopard shall watch over their cities: every one that goeth out thence shall be torn in pieces: because their transgressions are many, and their backslidings are increased” (Jeremiah 5:6, emphasis added). It is likely that Dante, in his writing of the passage, had a combination of the beasts from Jeremiah and *The Aeneid* in mind, and to ascribe inspiration to one over the other would place unnecessary competition between the two source passages.

The low-point of being chased by the beasts is offset by Dante meeting his guide. After retreating from the beasts, the guide figure emerges, seemingly out of nowhere: “my eyes made out a figure coming towards me / of one grown faint, perhaps from too much silence” (Canto I, ll 62-63). The suddenness of the journey is mirrored by the suddenness of the guide appearing. Dante immediately pleads with this figure, asking it to ““Have pity on my soul.../whichever you are, shade or living man” (Canto I, ll 65-66). The word choice of “soul” is important here. Despite the recent possibility of being consumed by wild beasts, Dante's worry is of the spirit,

not the body. Furthermore, the acknowledgement of the figure as “shade or living man” highlights the focus on the inner self, where one may receive guidance from something that is not living. This focus on internal guidance emphasizes the spiritual goal of the journey; it is not just that he wants to go through Hell to see Heaven, it is that he wants to atone for his sins and reach a state of salvation in the process.

The guide is Virgil, the Poet; he does not introduce himself as such, but allows Dante to guess through biographical deduction. He states he is “no longer [a] living man, though once I was” (Canto I, 67). This statement rules out the possibility of the guide as an angel, or some purely divine creation. He then tells of his own birth and upbringing: “[I] lived in Rome when good Augustus reigned, / when still the false and lying gods were worshipped” (Canto I, 71-2). The description of “false and lying gods” is allusive to the pagan gods of Roman culture, worshipped before the arrival of Christianity. Dante fashions and presents an implicit division and hierarchy here between pre and post-Christian beliefs. According to Musa, Virgil is the representation of “reason or human wisdom (the best that man can achieve on his own without the special grace of God) as well as poetry and art” (Musa 74). Dante chooses Virgil over someone like Aristotle because “Virgil was a poet and an Italian; in the *Aeneid* is recounted the hero’s descent into Hell” (Musa 75). In addition to this, “Virgil was considered a prophet, a judgment stemming from the interpretation of some obscure lines in the *Fourth Eclogue* as foretelling the coming of Christ. In this regard Dante saw Virgil as a sort of mediator between Imperial and Apostolic Rome” (Musa 75). This choice has appeals to a shared cultural background, as well as a shared literary heritage. It is important here to emphasize that the essence of Virgil the Poet is being invoked here. Even though emphasis is placed on his

biography, it is not the historical figure of Virgil that is focused upon, but rather, a distilled muse of the poet that influenced Dante the most. Dante (the author) is calling upon Virgil (the author) as a poetic figure to aid his own poetic figure through their journey.

Virgil's opening speech confirms his identity and begins a dialogue with the Pilgrim. Virgil states "I was a poet" and alludes to his masterwork *The Aeneid* (Canto I, 77). He does not dwell on this long, instead asking Dante "Why not climb up this beautiful mountain here, the beginning and the source of all man's joy?" (Canto I, 78). Since this mountain is a symbol for salvation, climbing the mountain is something all who wish to achieve this spiritual grace must endure. However, before answering the question, Dante heaps praise upon Virgil that highlights his profound influence:

O light and honor of other poets
 may my long years of study, and that deep love
 that made me search your verses, help me now!

You are my teacher, the first of all my authors,
 And you alone the one from whom I took
 The nobler style that was to bring me honor.

(Canto I, ll 82-87)

There is both admiration and attribution present here. Dante is deeply indebted to Virgil both as a role model of cultural significance and status as Poet, as well as an inspiration for his own poetry. His exclamatory "O" and comparison of Virgil to light implies Virgil is a catalyst to salvation. He explicitly states that Virgil is one that he studied and considers him both a

"teacher" and "the first of all my authors...the one from whom I took / the nobler style that was to bring me honor" (Canto I, ll 85-7). Dante (the author) was well-read in Virgil, and does not shy away from drawing inspiration from their works in his own creation. This speech is a sort of embedded epigraph to the individual who helped make this work possible.

Dante initially fails to understand the role Virgil plays for him, seeing him less as a guide and more as a savior who will do the "heavy lifting" for him. Dante begs Virgil to save him from the beasts and allow him to pass. This is not possible. Instead, Virgil tells him "you must journey down another road...if ever you hope to leave this wilderness" (Canto I, 91, 93). He explains that the beasts will not let him pass, that direct ascension up the mountain is not a possible route. He must take an alternate route to achieve his goal, and he, Virgil, will be the one to help him: "And so, I think it best you follow me / for your own good, and *I shall be your guide* / and lead you through an eternal place" (Canto I, ll 111-114, emphasis added). Virgil explicitly accepts and establishes his role as the guiding authority that will aid Dante through the journey. He also puts forth the notion that guidance is necessary to undertaking the journey and coming out successful. His status as legendary Poet makes this choice optimal because he is someone Dante will listen to with great reverence.

Before the journey begins, Virgil tries to clarify what Dante can expect in Hell. He tells Dante that in this place "you will hear desperate cries, and see / tormented shades, some old as Hell itself, / and know what second death is, from their screams" (ll 115-117). The "second death" he refers to is the death of the soul, the death that proceeds a physical passing. The description of "tormented shades" older than Hell speaks to the idea that those who came before Christianity are still under the punishments of the belief system, implying a domination of this

belief above all others. This has been seen already in the way that Virgil refers to the Pagan gods he worshipped when he was alive. At the time, they were not “false and lying,” they were the dominant religious system, and there was nothing wrong with worshipping multiple gods. There is an anachronistic imposition of values by Dante on Virgil. This is seen again when Virgil clarifies the limits of his guidance, that he can only take Dante so far, ““because that Emperor dwelling on high / will not let me lead any to His city, / since I in life rebelled against His law”” (Canto I, ll 124-126). He is not a Christian, and thus, cannot take him to the heaven of Christianity. However, he did not “rebel,” the idea that he rebelled is totally invalid since Christianity as Dante understands it was not available in ancient Rome. This lack of Christianity also places a defined limit on Virgil's capacity to guide.

Dante begs Virgil ““in the name of God, the God that you never knew, / save me from this evil place and worse”” (Canto I, ll 131-132). Dante is aware that even though Virgil was not a Christian, he can guide him through the first part of his journey. He wishes to be saved so he can ““see the gate Saint Peter guards”” (Canto I, 134). His ultimate goal is salvation, but for that to be achieved, he must first understand the depths of sin and misery. A guide is a necessary mediation to accomplish this goal.

The canto closes with an exit from the woods: ““then he moved on, and I moved close behind him”” (Canto I, 136). The close proximity of the two repeats throughout their descent. There is not only a spiritual protection presented here, but one of physical shielding as well. This image repeats itself many times over through the course of their journey.

Mediation of Guidance:

As the pair walk with each other, Virgil explains that Beatrice asked him to aid Dante. Since she is in Heaven, she cannot descend and help him herself; instead, Virgil, who is stuck in Limbo, acts as her surrogate. She asks him to use his "elegance of speech" to help save Dante's soul, and to "bring me [Beatrice] solace" (Canto II, 67, 69). It is a dead man of words who is asked to use the power of words to guide a living man of words. Throughout *Inferno*, Virgil directly explains what is going on in each circle; this highlights things explicitly for both Dante within the structure of the narrative, as well as the reader.

If Virgil, as postulated earlier, is the stand-in for reason and wisdom, then we can see Beatrice as the stand-in for a love supreme. Both of these attributes are necessary for Dante to achieve salvation. Virgil can show Dante the folly of humans, explain where people have gone wrong, and what they did to end up in Hell. However, because he died before Christ, and was not brought to heaven after the resurrection of Jesus, he cannot be the one to show Dante the splendor of Heaven. This puts a very defined limit to the terms of Virgil's guidance. It places him in a hierarchy above mere mortality, but below the full divinity of Beatrice (a Christian), Jesus (the Savior), and God (the Creator).

Secondary elements of Virgil's authority come to light throughout the journey. These are meant to reinforce the authority of Virgil's guidance beyond his poetic and cultural significance. For example, while the pair wait for help at the gates of Dis, Dante learns that Virgil has made the trip through the underworld before. He was guided by a sorceress, Erichtho. This pairing recalls the *Aeneid*, with Aeneas and Sibyl descending through the underworld. Musa argues that "Having no literary or legendary source, the story of Virgil's descent into hell was probably Dante's invention" (Musa 153). Regardless, this insight adds a practical element of expertise to

Virgil's guidance. Not only is Virgil someone who has written epics and lived in what Dante sees as the greatest empire, but he is someone who has personally traversed hell. He says to Dante "I know the road, and well, you can be sure" (Canto IX, 30).

Another example occurs in the sixteenth canto. Here, it is revealed that Virgil can read minds. Dante narrates some of his thoughts, and follows it up by saying "how cautious a man must be in company / with one who can not only see his actions / but read his mind and understand his thoughts" (Canto XVI, ll 118-120). This statement reinforces the totality of Virgil's authority. It is alluded to again in the nineteenth canto, when Dante says "'my pleasure is what pleases you / you are my lord, you know that from your will / I would not swerve. You even know my thoughts'" (Canto XIX, ll 37-39). Something like this is meant to show a guide with control over both the exterior and the interior, a guide who embodies the ultimate guide (God).

In the fourteenth canto, there is a metaphor presented that describes the relationship between Virgil and Dante. It is said by Dante: "I at once / implored him to provide me with the food / for which he had given me the appetite" (ll91-93). Virgil is the source of nourishment for Dante to grow from. The use of food as a point of comparison for salvation recalls the Bible: "'I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty'" (John 6:35). In the sixteenth canto, there is a reprise of the food language: "those sweet fruits promised me by my true guide" (Canto XVI, 62). Virgil not only guides Dante, he facilitates his growth.

The necessity of Virgil's presence in guiding Dante is confirmed when Virgil attempts to allow Dante to guide himself in the seventeenth canto. While Virgil talks with Geryon, he tells

Dante to talk to people he hasn't encountered yet “so that you may have / a knowledge of this round that is complete, /...go and see their torment for yourself” (Canto XVII, ll 37-39). Dante looks at them for a while, but speaks to them very briefly. Without the guide, he is unable to discern as much information or act with as much confidence. He is also afraid of upsetting Virgil: "And I, afraid my staying there much longer / might anger the one who warned me to brief, / turned my back on these frustrated sinners" (Canto XVII, ll 76-78). This incident highlights the essential role that Virgil plays as a necessary mediator in Dante's understanding of his journey.

In the fifteenth canto there is a crossroads between different types of guides and different authorities of guidance. Here, Dante comes across an old teacher of his, Brunetto Latini. Their dealings with each other are perhaps the most civil; they are certainly most intimate. Brunetto Latini, unlike others, is able to touch Dante, and when he does, is not pushed away: “[he] grabbed / my garments hem and shouted ‘How marvelous!’” (Canto XV, ll 23-24). In comparison, Dante tries to push away any souls who attempt to touch him. Also, unlike other residents of Hell, Dante can recognize Latini's face. This is rare, given the transformation and disfiguration of most souls.

A real point of analysis here is that Dante does not acknowledge to Brunetto Latini who Virgil is. He asks “what fortune or what destiny / leads you down here before your final hour? / and who is the one showing you the way?” (Canto XV, ll 46-48). Dante only answers the first question. It is as if he is embarrassed to admit he has another guide, a new teacher. Musa postulates that "naming Virgil, who has become his second 'teacher,' might offend Brunetto" (Musa 211). Brunetto Latini gives advice and prophecies about the future to Dante. He tells his

student to "follow your constellation / and you cannot fail to reach your port of glory" (Canto XV, ll 55-56). This statement is rings true at the very end of the volume, when the pair emerges from the underworld "to see once more the stars" (Canto XXXIV, 139). It is even more true at the end of the series when Dante is in Heaven amidst the stars, and Beatrice explains the heavens to him.

Dante thanks Brunetto Latini for the advice and tells him how much he meant to him as a teacher. At the end of the interaction, Virgil praises Dante: "he listens well who notes what he hears" (99). This sensory acuteness recalls the New Testament teaching: "Anyone who has ears for listening should listen!" (Mark 4:9).

Canonization:

Dante makes a concerted effort to canonize the population of the underworld in both positive and negative fashions. The primary positive canonization is Virgil, depicted as the greatest poet. Virgil is charged with the task of guiding Dante, not any of the other great poets that lounge in limbo, such as Homer. Virgil embodies past Roman greatness, and the highest reason humans can achieve. In turn, not only him, but his works are canonized as texts of great wisdom and insight; even his characters are canonized. Aeneas is seen in Limbo. Dante canonizes several historical figures from Rome as great ones whose only flaw was living and dying before Christianity.

This canonization is meant to affirm and negate the values that Dante purports in the text. For example, those in Limbo whose only crime is that "they did not know baptism," the first of the Christian sacraments (canto IV, 35). They "did not worship god the way one should; / I

myself [Virgil] am a member of this group” (ll 38-39). Here, Virgil not only reveals his place in Hell, but he admonishes himself for his lack of Christianity, despite having no way of knowing the faith as Dante would in Medieval Italy. This statement presents a doctrine of Christian supremacy that has been seen in Virgil's opening speech to Dante, and will repeat throughout the poem. This supremacism can be defined as a repeated notion that any form of worship that is not Christian will not get one into heaven, and is therefore inferior.

While in Limbo, Virgil verifies the story of Christ's descent into the underworld. Jesus journeyed to hell between his death on the cross and his resurrection. During this time, he battled Satan to retrieve important biblical figures from the fiery depths. An account of this story is found in the non-canonical Gospel of Nicodemus: "there rose upon the darkness there something like the light of the sun and shone, and light fell upon us all...all the dead who were bound were loosed from their chains...and the King of glory entered in like a man, and all the dark places of Hades were illuminated" (Nicodemus, qtd Barnstone 374-376). Virgil's testimony of this incident is meant to confirm “the teachings of unerring Christian doctrine” (Canto IV, 48). It also allows an opportunity to 'redeem' the figures of the old testament, who also lacked baptism, and justify their place in a Christian canon of pious figures.

Dante achieves the opposite effect as well, and condemns those he dislikes. This animosity primarily falls upon the Greeks. Many figures of Greek history and Myth are found throughout Hell. For example, Jason, hero of Greek myth, is seen in the eighth circle. His crime is "deceiving young Hypsipyle, / who had in turn deceived other woman" (Canto XVIII, ll 92-93). Similarly, Odysseus is seen in the eighth circle with Diomed "suffering in anger with each other, / just vengeance makes them march together" (Canto XXVI, ll 56-57). A third

example is seen in the realm of the falsifiers: Myrrha, who commits incest by pulling a bed trick on her father, and Sinon, who tricked the Romans into allowing the Trojan horse in. Sinon is mentioned in *the Aeneid*. The degree of punishment doled out to those that are traditionally celebrated as heroic figures points to Dante's fierce preference and defense of Roman history and mythology.

When Dante and Virgil encounter Greek figures, Virgil tells him not to speak because they are Greeks and they will not listen to an Italian:

“see to it your tongue refrains from speaking.

Leave it to me to speak, for I know well

what you would ask; perhaps since they were Greeks,

they might not pay attention to your words.”

(Canto XXVI, ll 72-75)

The animosity is reciprocated, affirming the Greek/Roman polemic. Here, Virgil is a mediator, acting with deference towards his influences. Despite his dislike for the Greeks, in Virgil's speech Dante tacitly acknowledges the impact the culture and authors had on Virgil's writing.

It is an interesting point of contrast that the Greeks who were of use to medieval thinking avoid this slander. For example, "Euclid the geometer" dwells in Limbo (Canto IV, 141). Dante justifies those who are still in favor in his era, while expelling those who slighted Rome and the Romans.

Verbal Guidance and Divine Justice:

When the pair first enter the underworld, there is an immediate opportunity for Virgil to display his authority to Dante. Virgil convinces Charon, the first of two ferrymen encountered in

Hell, to allow Dante on the boat across the vestibule. He tells him “It is so willed, there where the power is / for what is willed; that’s all you need to know” (Canto III, ll 95-96). The other Ferryman is Phlegyas, who, like Charon, is unhappy about Dante’s presence. Virgil does not need to invoke the language of divinity, instead making an appeal to expedience: ““you will have us with you / no longer than it takes to cross the muck”” (Canto VIII, ll 20-21). Both Phlegyas and Charon are guards of hell who are receptive and beholden to the presence and spoken authority of Virgil.

The statement Virgil makes to Charon reinforces what was established in the second canto: Virgil is a mediator, acting on behalf of divine will. He is not a savior who personally wields divinity, but rather is one who enacts it. Virgil expands on his ideas of Divine Justice when he reveals to Dante what motivates the souls in the vestibule to cross the river and enter Hell: “it is Divine Justice that spurs them on” (Canto III, 125). Here, he suggests the totalizing force of divinity: both the good and the bad are motivated by Divine will. Musa articulates this point when he says "those who were so willing to sin on earth are in Hell damned with a willingness to go to their just retribution" (Musa 96). For the bad, there is motion towards some retribution, and the good, towards salvation. Dante falls into the latter; this is proven when Virgil says “A good soul never comes to make this crossing, / so, if Charon grumbles at the sight of you, / you see now what his words are really saying” (Canto III, ll 127-129). Dante, despite his wandering off the path, is a good person at his core. His opportunity to traverse hell and see all these sins is meant to preserve his fundamental goodness. As one who is halfway through life, Dante could easily turn to a life of sin. Given that he lives in a corrupt society run by a corrupt church, he is surrounded by sin. The lives of the people the duo encounter all serve as warnings

to Dante for his (and the reader's) future behavior. Virgil rearticulates the purpose of their mission later on, when talking to the centaurs:

“he travels by necessity, not pleasure
 a spirit came, from singing alleluia,
 to give me this extraordinary mission,
 he is no rogue nor is a criminal spirit.”

(Canto XII, ll 87-90)

There is an explicit restating of Divine Justice at work when the pair encounter blasphemers, usurers, and sodomites in the seventh circle: “There I saw / God’s justice in its dreadful operation” (Canto XIV, ll 5-6). The sights seen may be dreadful, but they are done with the purpose of vengeance. Shortly after, Dante says something that appears to capture the agenda of the book: “O just revenge of God! How awesomely / you should be feared by everyone who reads / these truths that were revealed to my own eyes” (Canto XIV, ll 16-18). Dante takes his journey to understand and articulate the vengeance of God, and use his experience to warn others. Dante speaks in a prophetic tone in this section, except instead of reaching his conclusion by direct conversation with God (à la Jeremiah), it is from witnessing God’s punishment first-hand.

The strength of Virgil's power comes from beyond him (Beatrice and God) but the authority of his power is perceived by those around him, such as Dante, the guards of each circle, and the spirits that occupy each realm. Virgil often uses a verbal incantation to ward off those who seek to block Dante on his journey. For example, Virgil almost repeats word-for-word what he said to Charon when the pair encounter Minos guarding the second circle of hell, reserved for

the Lustful: “Do not attempt to stop his fated journey; / it is so willed there where the power is / for what is willed; that's all you need to know” (Canto V, ll 22-24). Virgil, like a dutiful priest, is able to recite words like a prayer to fend off trouble. He states that their journey is purposeful, sanctioned by God, and the details do not concern the wards of Hell. This method is something that only works for so long. It is worth noting how in spite of a very Christian worldview, Dante has no problem implementing traditional Pagan mythological figures in his depiction of the underworld. He appears comfortable building off past conceptions, while adding the assertion that Christian salvation is the utmost spiritual achievement that supersedes all else.

The fourth circle of hell, like the previous circles, is guarded by a figure the pair must pass. In this case, it is Plutus, the god of wealth. Virgil dismisses him verbally, but does so without repeating the earlier “incantation” verbatim. Here, he takes on a more aggressive tone:

“be quiet, cursed wolf of hell
 feed on burning bile that rots your guts.
 This journey to the depths does have a reason,
 for it is willed on high, where Michael wrought
 a just revenge for the bold assault on God.”

(Canto VII, ll 8-12)

Virgil has to change his tone in the face of different guards. Here, Virgil repeats the justification of the mission but adds an angry bite to assert himself. Virgil wards off the Minotaur who guard the seventh circle with angry words, similar to how he approached Plutus: “begone, you beast, for this one is not led / down here by means of clues your sisters gave him; / he comes here only

to observe your torments” (Canto XII, ll 19-21). In this interaction, Virgil uses insults to throw his weight around and intimidate the minotaur to allow the duo to pass.

Virgil displays his internal authority within the underworld when the pair encounter the centaurs. One prepares to shoot Dante, but Virgil asks to speak with Chiron, the head centaur he is friends with, and all is well. Here, Virgil makes an appeal to an individual within hell, and not to the divinity of the journey. He uses his connections within the underworld as well as the authority he is granted outside the realm.

The above examples all fall into a realm of verbal guidance, spoken assertions. There are few examples of Virgil making gestural assertions, a sort of physical guidance in their journey. One of the only examples of this is when the pair encounters Cerberus guarding the third circle. Virgil quells the beast by tossing slime down its mouth. The ritual of pacifying shifts; words of warning are replaced by an action. The recitation of a prayer is replaced by the sprinkling of a metaphorical holy water. The use of physical actions to move through the underworld appear to be more common in Dante's predecessors. For example, Aeneas and Sibyl give the golden branch to Charon as a token to grant their passage across the river. One can interpret the focus on verbal incantations as a shift in religious rites; the focus on prayer in Christianity as opposed to the sacrificial gestures of Paganism.

Failures of Guidance:

Despite the many successes that Virgil has in navigating Dante through the underworld, his guidance is not without flaws and limitations. The ninth canto contains a failure of Virgil: He is unable to get himself and Dante into the city of Dis on his own. As they approach the gates, the fallen angels there are furious: "who, without death, / dares walk into the kingdom of the

dead?" (Canto VIII ll 84-85). They demand Dante go on alone, and Virgil return to Limbo.

Virgil says with confidence to Dante that he should not “fear, [for] the journey we are making / none can prevent: such power did decree it” (Canto VIII. ll 104-105). Virgil has total faith that God is on their side and will get them through all the challenges they face. However, the angels do not listen to Virgil. They deny his authority, though perhaps it is also a question of how evil these angels are. Regardless, Virgil has unwavering confidence in someone descending to help them make it past. While they wait, he says “such help was promised” confirming that its not a question of his own authority (Canto IX, 8).

While they wait, Virgil protects Dante from the furies who threaten to call Medusa upon them. The pair is saved by an unnamed figure who opens the gate. This figure appears to be an angel with Christ-like qualities. It is seen "walking the Styx, his feet dry on the water" (Canto IX, 81). The ability to walk on water is a power of Christ accounted for in more than one Gospel; the angel's ability to do such acts as a signifier that they act on behalf of Jesus.

Once the gates are opened, Virgil regains his confidence. He admonishes the furies for thinking they could ever overpower the will of God: “why do you stubbornly resist that will / whose end can never be denied and which, / more than one time, increased your suffering?” (Canto IX, ll 94-6). Despite their high degree of resistance, the creator of the realm is the one who controls it, and the one representing him will be the victorious one. It is appropriate that this incident of angel-like creatures defying divine will should occur right before the circle of heretics.

A second incident of Virgil's shortcomings occur in the twenty-first canto. This section introduces the malebranche, who are arguably the biggest source of trouble for Virgil and Dante.

The Critic CJ Ryan, in their article “Inferno XXI: Virgil and Dante: A Study in Contrasts,” argues that “this canto suggests that his [Virgil's] guidance has a further limitation: not only the heights of heaven and goodness, but the depths of hell and evil escape full comprehension by Virgil” (Ryan 16). Virgil is not as equipped to deal with some of the beings in Hell as he believes himself to be. The malebranche cause more unease than others; this can be seen when Virgil tells Dante to hide behind rocks before he approaches them. He warns Dante that the malebranche may give him a hard time but “you must not fear, I know how things are run here; / I have been caught in as bad a fix as before” (Canto XXI, ll 62-3). Virgil has confidence in his knowledge, but Dante sees Virgil's confidence falter: “as soon as he set foot on the sixth bank / he forced himself to look as bold as possible” (Canto XXI, ll 65-66). Virgil addresses Malacoda, the head of the troop:

“Do you think, Malacoda...
 that you would see me here, come all this way,
 against all opposition, and still safe,
 without propitious fate and God’s permission?
 Now let us pass, for it is willed in heaven
 that I lead another by this savage path.”

(Canto XXI, ll 79-84)

It appears that this speech helps their cause, because the line that follows is “with this the devil’s arrogance collapsed / his pitchfork, too, dropped right down to his feet, / as he announced to all: ‘dont touch this man’” (Canto XXI, ll 85-87). The gesture of falling to his feet drips with irony; dropping his pitchfork appears as a theatrical flourish. Ryan asses this interaction, saying

that "Virgil retains his tone of confidence throughout this first dialogue...he speaks with the confidence of someone relying on the yet greater divine power" (Ryan 18). Virgil feels divine will supersedes the desire and ability of the devils to act maliciously. He acts in complete earnest while they act deceptively. This belief speaks of an overconfidence that borders on arrogance; for, "is it wise to regard the devils as...piously deferential adults, their opposition wilting at the very mention of divine providence? The devils have, after all, shown themselves already to be not only cruelly indifferent to human suffering, but also capable of being blasphemously witty" (Ryan 19). These are not humans being dealt with, but devils in the realm of fraud. If they were "piously deferential adults" they would not be this deep in Hell to begin with. Virgil thinks the tactics he used to pacify the earlier wards of hell will be equally successful with the malebranche.

It is Dante who notices how suspicious the situation is while Virgil is oblivious to the dynamics at play. Dante says:

“Oh master, I don’t like the look of this,
 ...lets go, just you and me, no escort,
 you know the way. I want no part of them!

If you’re observant, as you usually are,
 why is it you don’t see them grind their teeth
 and wink at one another? - we’re in danger!”

(Canto XXI, ll 127-132).

Even when Dante criticizes Virgil, it is wrapped in deferential praise. Virgil dismisses these worries by saying their actions are towards the souls, not for them. Ryan argues that "Dante is thereby suggesting that there is in Virgil an unhealthy disregard for the evil embodied in the devils" (Ryan 19). Virgil is unable to perceive the true degree of evil present in these creatures. The consequence of their deception is "that Virgil himself in the narrative is unaware of an important aspect of the scene and of his own character" (Ryan 19). He is unaware of their deceptive nature and his inability to recognize fraud. Considering the constant praise that is heaped upon Virgil, this scene reveals a shortcoming in his guidance. His unfettering belief in divine aid leads to an arrogance that comes back to hurt them.

The journey with the malebranche continues into the next two cantos, where they lead Virgil and Dante through a circle of fraud reserved for grafting. In this section, they torture a grafter who Dante asks to question amidst the torture. The grafter aptly displays their grafting ability by escaping the malebranche through manipulative smooth-talking. This deception causes a dispute between the troops, and Dante and Virgil leave the malebranche fighting each other, and walk "in silence, all alone, without an escort" (Canto XXIII,1). Dante senses something is not right, predicting that the group will come after them. In the realm of fraud, the malebranche became victims of fraud, and want to retaliate. Virgil agrees, and right as they make their escape, the malebranche show up in an attempt to get them. They barely escape, only evading capture because they make it outside the borders of the area the malebranche guard. Virgil says "High Providence that willed for them to be / the ministers in charge of the fifth ditch / also willed them powerless to leave their realm" (Canto XXIII, ll 55-57). Even though arrogance in divine will got the pair in trouble, divine will is also what ends up saving them, because the malebranche cannot

leave the realm they occupy. This benefit of boundaries points to a strict teleological structure that governs the entire *Inferno*.

After their escape, Virgil remarks how angry he is that the malebranche lied to them: “He told a lie about this business, / that one who hooks the sinners up there” (XXIII, ll 140-141). Dante sees “his face revealing traces of anger” (XXIII, 146). The whole series of events with the malebranche shows the shortcomings of Virgil as a guide. Despite his many triumphs and the general depiction of him as the embodiment of perfection, he is still subject to human flaws.

Political Critiques:

Aside from presenting an orderly conception of divine wrath and punishment, Dante devotes space in the *Inferno* to a secular-oriented critique of Italian culture of the fourteenth century. This politically-based criticism is generally aimed towards the wealthy of Italy, and their abuse of money for selfish purposes. Dante has scorn towards those who “esteem themselves great men / who then wallow here like pigs in mud, / leaving behind their repulsive fame” (Canto VIII, ll 49-51). His depictions of these citizens show that their crimes come back to haunt them, and the punishment in the afterlife supersedes any rewards felt while they were alive.

The people that Dante encounter in Hell either warn him of these abuses, or are guilty of it themselves. An early example of this warning is with Ciaccio, a citizen of Florence. Ciaccio warns Dante of the downfall of the city: “After much contention / they will come to bloodshed; the

rustic party / will drive the other out by brutal means" (Canto VI, ll 64-66). This early interaction alludes to civil strife that did in fact occur during Dante's lifetime. Another example of an Italian sinner who warns Dante of the downfall of Florence is Vanni Fucci. Vanni Fucci is in hell "because of theft: / I stole the treasury of the sacristy" (Canto XXIV, ll 137-138). After admitting to his crimes, he prophesizes that Florence "shall change its men and laws" (Canto XXIV, 144). Like Ciaccio, he predicts the civil strife that occurs in Dante's lifetime. This civil strife is what led to Dante's exile from Florence, which in part prompted him to write *The Divine Comedy*.

These conversations also warn Dante of the high volume of Italians he will encounter in Hell: "they lie with blacker souls... / by different sins punished down to different depths" (Canto VI, ll 85-87). A similar statement is made by Venedico Caccianemico, who defends his sins by ousting the countless Italians in the various circles. He says to Dante that "I'm not the only Bolognese who weeps here - / hardly! This place is packed with us" (Canto XVIII, ll 58-59). These comments remove the poem from the realm of pure fantasy, and engages with the world Dante inhabited. There is a similar process of canonization that was seen earlier, just with Italian characters over time. These critiques of Italian figures are especially powerful given that Dante wrote the poem in Italian, as opposed to the common practice of Latin as the choice language for literary works. This accessibility speaks to an intention of reaching the widest possible range of Italian citizens.

Religious Critiques:

Dante's defense of an orderly, orthodox Christianity is not without criticism. Although a fierce believer and defender of God, Dante is critical of false practitioners of Christianity. He most fiercely attacks the Papacy, suggesting a proto-Lutheran argument. In the tenth canto, a

figure mentions that several papal figures occupy the realm of the heretics, as well as other circles: ““more than a thousand lie with me / the second Fredrick is here and the cardinal / is with us. And the rest I shall not mention”” (Canto X, ll 118-120). The following canto makes this more explicit by mentioning Pope Anastasias, “the pope / Photinus lured away from the straight path” (Canto XI, ll 8-9). Here, Dante invokes the same imagery of a pious path that he established for himself in the first canto. This imagery affirms the notion that all must travel a path through the course of life, that there is indeed a right and wrong road to travel.

Dante's religious criticism takes on a powerful, prophet-like tone later in the text. In the nineteenth canto, he rails against simony. He says the “scum” have taken “those things of God that rightly should be wed / to holiness” and “prostitute[d]” them in exchange for money or personal gain (Canto XIX, ll 1-4). Here is a great depiction of the corruption of the church; if one had to pick a single canto to represent the entire critical aims of the *Inferno*, this would be it. Pope Nicholas III is dangling by his legs in a hole of fire. When Dante approaches him, he mistakes Dante for the next pope, Boniface VIII, who will take Nicholas' place, pushing him further down into the flames. The pope asserts that this would continue with the subsequent pope, Clement V. The image of this lineage of corruption captures the retributive message Dante aims for. During this interaction, Dante says “I stood there like a priest who is confessing / some vile assassin who, fixed in his ditch, / has called him back again to put off dying” (XIX, ll 49-51). This description creates an ultimate role-reversal: the potential sinner on their path to piousness is found to be more holy than the ultimate representative of the church, the supposed face of Christian practices.

The rhetoric of this exchange is some of the highest in the story. It shows Dante is someone with education that is actively learning from his experiences. He asks:

"what was the sum of money

That holy Peter had to pay our Lord

Before he gave the keys into his keeping?

Certainly He asked no more than 'Follow me.'

Nor did Peter or the rest extort gold coins

...so stay there, for you are rightly punished."

(Canto XIX, ll 90-94, 97)

Here, Dante calls out how greed is antithetical to a Christian ethos. He does not do this strictly through condemnation, but makes appeals to the original source material of the religion. In doing this, he shows himself to be more true to Christianity than those who claim to represent it in an institutional setting.

While in the realm of the Hypocrites, the pair comes across someone on a cross: "that impaled figure you see there / advised the Pharisees it was expedient / to sacrifice one man for all the people"" (XXIII, ll 115-117) Translator Mark Musa points to the book of John as the source of this reference: "Caiaphas, the high priest of the Jews, maintained that it was better that one man (Jesus) die than for the Hebrew nation to be lost (John XI, 49-50). Annas, Caiaphas's father-in-law, delivered Jesus to him for judgment." (Musa 284). In condemning Caiaphas, Dante seeks vengeance for the death of Jesus. A problematic addition to this incident is the use of anti-Semitic language: "His father-in-law and other council members, / who were the seed of

evil for all Jews, / are racked the same way all along this ditch" (XXIII, ll 121-123). This language is used to cover up the reality that it was the Romans who killed Jesus, not the Jews. Virgil is stunned by this punishment: "I saw Virgil staring down amazed / at this body stretching out in crucifixion, so vilely punished in the eternal exile" (XXIII, ll 124-126). Why is Virgil amazed? There is speculation between whether he is processing something that was not there last time he passed through this region, or whether the starkness of the symbol is what strikes him (Musa 284-5).

By way of problematic condemnation of other religions, Dante depicts a certain religious figure in Hell who is generally forbidden to be depicted. This occurs in the realm of Sowers of Scandal and Schism. Here, Dante depicts the prophet of Islam, Muhammad (spelt Mahomet in the poem) with "his guts spilled out" (Canto XXVIII 25). Muhammad and Ali, the first Caliph, are punished for supposedly acting as "sowers of scandal and schism in life" (Canto XXVIII 35). This depiction not only violates a main tenet of Islam, but functions as another example of the Christian supremacy discussed earlier. Any religious competition is seen as straying from the one true path. Dante not only sees Christianity as the ultimate faith, but as the only true one.

Dante as Anthropologist:

Throughout his journey, many people accost Dante, wishing to share their plight. Dante is a sort of mythical anthropologist, going to an unfamiliar realm to collect stories of people to relay back home. Except, in this case, it is not a foreign land, but rather a metaphysical dimension. An example of his general stump speech to the souls is as follows:

"So may the memory of you not fade
from the minds of men up there in the first world,

but rather live on under many suns,

tell me your names and where it was you lived;

do not let the dreadful, loathsome punishment

discourage you from speaking openly.”

(Canto XXIX, ll103-108)

In terms of historical importance, most of the individuals are inconsequential. However, the idea of collecting past experiences to help people in the present / future is an important part of the guiding process. The telling of these stories are not about the legacy of the individuals, but rather the cautionary warning that these stories provide.

It is during these interactions one can think about who accosts Dante and why. For example, Ciaccio recognizes Dante and wants to talk to a familiar face. In comparison, other people only stop Dante because they recognize his accent, or because they see he is somehow alive in the underworld. It is also during these interactions that one can consider what emotions motivate the souls to share their story

Some souls tell their story for redemption. An example of this is in the suicide forest. Here, Virgil asks a soul to “tell him [Dante] who you were; he can make amends / and will, by making bloom again your fame / in the world above, where his return is sure” (Canto XIII, ll 52-54). There is great use of figurative language here, with the image of the tree in bloom. Storytelling becomes a form of currency here, a service held over the heads of the souls. In a way, this makes Dante a Christ-like figure: the confessional recounting of the damned becomes the closest these souls will get to salvation. It also plays off the vanity present in all of the souls.

There are other souls that share their stories out of skepticism. For example, Guido Da Montefeltro, a soldier turned priest who sanctioned fraud and refused to repent. He became a priest thinking it would absolve him of his actions as a soldier, and then he thought the pope absolving him of his wrongdoings would actually save his soul. He tells Dante his story because he does not think Dante will survive the underworld:

“If I thought that I were speaking to a soul
 who someday might return to see the world,
 most certainly this flame would cease to flicker;

but since no one, if I have heard the truth
 ever returns alive from this deep pit,
 with no fear of dishonor I answer you.”

(Canto XXVII, ll 61-66)

His statement hinges on that qualifying “if”. Unlike the other souls, he does not jump at the opportunity to tell his story. He only shares his story because he does not believe it will ever reach the ears of other living beings. His arrogance results in dishonoring himself, while serving as a valuable lesson for Dante and the reader.

There are some souls that tell their story for revenge. An example of this is Ugolino. He is initially hesitant to tell his story, but agrees “if my words can be seed to bear / the fruit of infamy for this betrayer, / who feeds my hunger, then I shall speak - in tears” (Canto XXXIII, ll 7-9). He does not share his story for his own vanity or pride, but rather to go after the one who put him in the position he faced before death. Ugolino's story is truly heart wrenching. This story contains

what is probably the most bone chilling line in the entire poem: "then hunger proved more powerful than grief" (Canto XXXIII 75). The death of Ugolino's children embodies the tragic nature of victimhood; those who are not guilty, but still suffer for the crimes others commit. In sharing his story, Ugolino gets as close to revenge as possible on those who caused him so much pain.

There are times Dante's anthropological aims fall short. For example, he accidentally kicks someone in the ice of the ninth circle and tries to make up for it by saying "it might serve you well, if you seek fame, / for me to put your name down in my notes" (Canto XXXII, ll 92-3). Their response is far from enthusiastic: "That's the last thing I would want! / that's not the way to flatter in these lowlands! / stop pestering me like this - get out of here!" (Canto XXXII, ll 94-6). There are souls that have no desire to be remembered, and find a telling of their woes to be anything but redeeming.

Closing Cantos:

As Dante enters the last circle of hell, he struggles to articulate what he sees: "to talk of the bottom of the universe / the way it truly is, is no child's play, / no task for tongues that gurgle baby-talk." (Canto XXXII, ll 7-9). There is so much tension here. The entire text builds in intensity, showing increasingly cruel punishments. Yet, when the pair reaches the bottom, it is still; there is an air of silence to the ninth circle. A geological telos is seen here that echoes their journey: "while we were getting closer and closer to the center / of the universe, where all weights must converge" (XXXII, ll 73-4). In the same way the mission converges, the weights of the universe do as well.

In the center of this last circle is Lucifer. He is seen with three heads, his three mouths chewing on the most evil sinners. The people in the mouth of Satan are meant to be “the three worst sinners of all mankind, the worst of those who betrayed their benefactors: Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius” (Musa 379). Judas is the one ““who suffers most of all”” (Canto XXXIV, 61). This choice captures the aims and biases of the poem so well: with the aim of defending Roman history as well as Christ, it is fitting that the ones who betrayed the Romans and Christ are the absolute worst, aside from the one who betrayed God himself (Lucifer).

Dante recognizes that the punishment is just: “If once he was as fair as now he's foul / and dared to raise his brows against his Maker, / it is fitting that all grief should spring from him” (Canto XXXIV, ll 34-36). It is worth noting that there is no dialogue with Satan; the sheer sight is enough for Dante to learn. An interesting detail that Dante adds is that the three heads of Satan are a whitish yellow, red, and “the color of those people’s skin / who live along the river Nile’s descent” (Canto XXXIV, ll 44-45). Satan is depicted in a multi-racial form, which shows the universal vulnerability of succumbing to sin.

After they see the trio of heads and the trio of sinners being “crunched” (Canto XXXIV, 55), Virgil says ““Now is the time / to leave this place, for we have seen it all”” (Canto XXXIV, 68-9). There is a definitive conclusion to this portion of the journey. That is not to say the adventure is complete, but rather to point to an idea of a defined starting and ending point, a road that is walked on until it turns into another one, and a guide that leads you until another one steps in.

Chapter Three: Subversive Guidance and Fracturing in *I am Not Sidney Poitier*

I am Not Sidney Poitier is a far cry from Dante's *Inferno*. A distinct difference between the texts is that they are written in different forms. Dante's *Inferno* is a poem, an epic in line with poets such as Virgil and Homer. Dante wrote in a consistent interlocking structure of *terza rima*, which adds a structural element of coherence to a piece that aims to present a unified vision of what lies beyond this world. Everett dabbles in poetry, but is primarily a novelist, a form that has little, if any, formal rules. Another distinct difference between the two artists is the ideology they present in the works. Both authors heavily engage with theoretical texts and implement these worldviews into their works. Dante, a medieval Christian, aspires to create a totalized view of the underworld, purgatory, and heaven. He generally affirms orthodoxy and tradition, and a belief in God is a central grounding tenet to the entire *Divine Comedy*. In contrast, Everett, operating in the post-modern landscape of the 21st century, presents a fractured view of the world: meaning is anything but clear, and one cannot rely on a traditional guides or systems of belief for answers. These contrasting worldviews manifest in contrasting guide figures. Dante implements a distinct guide figure who stands by the Pilgrim the entire *Inferno*. Everett presents a whole series of guides, all of whom fall short of fulfilling their expected role. There are many and absurd guide figures because the authority of guidance is impossible. There is narrative, social, and linguistic fragmentation seen throughout the book. This fragmentation suggests that guide figures don't make sense any more: they pretend to and aspires towards goals that cant be achieved. These failures stand in for broader category of fracturing or brokenness explored in the text, such as the breakdown of narrative authority, of economic hierarchy, and racial boundaries.

Everett avoids presenting Not Sidney as a heroic figure. Dante, although portraying the pilgrim as an everyman, is nonetheless a hero on a heroic journey. He is called to adventure in the name of enlightenment and love, with salvation waiting at the end of the road. If there is any "call to adventure" that can be seen with Not Sidney, it occurs after he drops out of high school: "I decided right then to light out for the territory, as it were, to leave my childhood, to abandon what had become my home, my safety, and to discover myself...this [incident] became a prophetically, apocalyptically instructive, even sibylline, moment" (Everett 43). Not Sidney attempts to restore order out of the chaos his life is in after leaving the structure of school. He speaks in a grand fashion that has ironic tones in this text, but one can imagine these sentiments being said in complete earnest by Dante. Unlike Dante, whose journey follows an orderly progression, Not Sidney's journey winds back and forth, with his getting lost and lack of a distinct, linear progression functioning as a main tenet of his growth. However, these meanderings are not without purpose; each failed journey is a lesson in the problematic nature of guidance. These adventures ultimately culminate in an understanding of identity that, although extremely different from Dante, nonetheless shows a character coming to better understand themselves and the world around them.

Before the narrative begins, there is an important disclaimer:

all characters depicted in this novel are completely fictitious, regardless of similarities to any extant parties and regardless of shared names. In fact, one might go so far as to say that any shared name is ample evidence that any fictitious character in this novel is NOT in any way a depiction of anyone living, dead or imagined by anyone other than the

author. This qualification applies, equally, to the character whose name is the same as the authors.

(Everett 1)

This warning is more than a legal disclaimer to avoid lawsuits for slander; it indicates a certain mindset that governs the book. By stating the characters are completely fictitious, Everett acknowledges that he is operating in the realm of fiction, the realm of ideas, not history and facts. By naming a character directly after someone, it conjures a likeness and not a direct evocation. If one was really trying to emulate a person in the real world and comment on them, they could make an allegorical stand-in; they could take traits and subtly place them within the characters to make their point (ie Orwell's *Animal Farm*). Dante does not do this; although one can argue that *Inferno* is essentially a work of fiction, when Dante mentions a historical figure (ie any papal figures) he is referring to that historical person. In *I am Not Sidney Poitier*, the heavy-handed nature of taking a name directly is meant to show parody at work. When Everett clarifies that these depictions are not anything “other than the author[s]” own representations, he asserts that the characters are used to tell his story and present his ideas (Everett 1). He does not represent any agenda, in the sense of supporting a political party or religious denomination (unlike Dante, a proud Christian and exiled Florentine whose work is meant to critique the city and defend the religion).

Exposition:

I Am Not Sidney Poitier opens with a self-aware disclaimer of the part of the protagonist, Not Sidney: “I am the ill-starred fruit of a hysterical pregnancy, and surprisingly, odd though I might be, I am not hysterical myself. I’m rather calm, in fact; some might say waveless” (Everett

3). From the onset of this text, it is clear that this book operates in a realm distinctly different from Dante. Dante would not call himself waveless; in fact, something lacking form is antithetical to his ethos. This opening paragraph plays off a trope in literature where a narrator defends their sanity (i.e. Poe's "Tell Tale Heart") but with the language of hysteria. The word "hysteria" repeats itself multiple times over in this opening sequence, referring to two previous "hysterical miscarriages" and "a hysterical delivery" (Everett 4). The end of the paragraph sows doubt about all the preceding information: "at least this was the story told to me" (Everett 3). The use of a passive, doubtful voice is a far cry from how Dante would write. Instead of establishing narrative authority, Everett presents a narrator who comical subverts narrative control of the story from the onset of the book.

The opening of the text also sets up the absurd origin story of Not Sidney: "I was born after two years of hysterical gestation, and who knows what happens in a mind when expectant, anticipative for so long" (Everett 3). The circumstances of Not Sidney's birth present a comic riff on the virgin birth. Instead of a divine miracle impregnating someone, it is hysteria. Everett's playing with biblical tropes is seen again when "the labor proceed to last some forty hours" (Everett 4). This comment toys with the biblical motif of events taking place over forty days and forty nights (ie Noah's ark and Jesus' journey in the desert). In making fun of these religious signifiers, Everett makes clear the text does not operate in a religious realm.

Not Sidney has a theory of his birth, that around month fourteen his mother "somehow managed to find and utilize the sexual organs of my father (a term I of course use in the strictest zoological sense), who may or may not have been Sidney Poitier" (Everett 5). This passive aside shows a lack of interest in who his father is. Everett quickly dismisses what could be the central

question of whether Not Sidney is the offspring of the actor. This choice also avoids the creation of a trite storyline that revolves around a search for the missing father.

An early subversive character of guidance seen in the book is the drunken doctor who delivers Not Sidney. The authority of the professional, qualified adult is replaced by one in a “Thunderbird-booze haze” (Everett 4). During the delivery, a neighbor asks the doctor if he would like her to boil water, so as to have something ready to clean the baby once delivered. He responds that “tea would be nice,” not even considering how it would help with the delivery (Everett 4). The narration cuts to the doctor’s thoughts: “the doctor was quite sad he’d been called because even though he had taken the Hippocratic oath, he thought that there were better things he could have been doing, not the least of which was finishing the bottle he’d abandoned” (Everett 4-5). Instead of presenting a dramatic entrance of a professional first responder to facilitate a moment as tender as birth, the story instead presents a person who would rather attend to and is distracted by their own interests. The depiction is done with a humorous tone, and avoids condemning the action.

Another early example of a failed guide is Raymond, Not Sidney's karate teacher. Hired to protect Not Sidney from the beatings "from boys with whom I sought to play," Raymond does more damage to Not Sidney than he does educating him (Everett 13). Raymond teaches by example, repeating the beatings that Not Sidney receives. He fails, essentially because of a fluke in the schedule: "Though he was able to observe the damage, debrief me on the tactics used against me, all of his instruction was lost into the air during the following six days, so that by the next Wednesday I was facing either a brand-new attacker or an old one with new tricks" (Everett

14). The most helpful thing Raymond does is function as the first person to succumb to Not Sidney's fezmerization, a sort of hypnotic tool of defense that reoccurs throughout the book. Raymond ends up being a minor, passing figure in Not Sidney's life: "a few years disappeared into wherever time goes and with them my childhood, Claudia, the cook and my karate teacher" (Everett 29). What could have been an important mentor-esque figure who imparts a lifelong skill to a student is instead a comical example of educational shortcomings.

Ted Turner:

Ted Turner appears as a failed guide in the sense he fails to conform to what would typically be expected of someone in his situation. The real life Ted Turner is a man of many faces, and Everett bases the depiction in reality, but does not want the depiction to be considered realistic. For example, Ted was indeed married to Jane Fonda, who makes a brief cameo, and he does in fact have a ranch in Montana, which is alluded to. However, the things said by the Ted Turner of this book would not be said by the real life media mogul. The similarities point to a likeness and create a character who has origins in reality, but not a depiction that is to be taken seriously.

Ted is first described as "the manic white man" who pays a visit to Not Sidney's mother, Portia "shortly before her death" due to her large investment in his company (Everett 6). She calls him Teddy; they have a good rapport, and after she dies we learn she named him executor of her will. His speeches are free-wheeling and shift between topics without segues. For example, his first conversation with Not Sidney oscillates between Portia's investment, cookies, and legos. Diatribes by Ted juggle many topics, often in an interlocking and humorous way. This

tough to follow method of speech undercuts the professional articulation that would be expected of a successful billionaire.

Ted brings Not Sidney to live with him in Atlanta after Portia dies. Not Sidney clarifies that “to say that I lived with or was raised by Turner is misleading and simply or completely untrue. I lived at one of his houses and was left pretty much to my own unformed devices” (Everett 8). Turner does not formally adopt him, bring him into the family and become a father-type figure. In fact, he goes out of his way to avoid this notion: “Ted had steadfastly maintained any boundary that might have confused our relationship with some suggestion that I was an adopted member of the family” (Everett 153). Ted distinctly avoids the sentimental trap that is set by the situation. He is aware of how the situation can be perceived, and avoids falling into it: “to Turner's credit even he was not comfortable with the scenario of the rich do-gooding white man taking in the poor little black child. Television was polluted with that model, and it didn't take a genius to understand that something was wrong with it.” (Everett 8). Here, Not Sidney is alluding to the show *Different Strokes*, a popular show based on that exact model of a rich white man taking in poor black children to live with him. Ted states this distaste explicitly when he presents his opposition to “that model of the black child being raised by some great white father. I'm not that arrogant” (Everett 12). Ted both denies and condemns the sentimentality. Through this characterization, Everett explicitly denies the conventional path the story could take, where Not Sidney and Ted bond, Ted becomes the father figure Not Sidney never had, and they both learn lessons about class and race along the way.

Everett depicts Ted as someone with a high degree of self-awareness when it comes to economics and race. When Betty, a tutor of Not Sidney, raves about "the evils of supply-side economics," calling it "the work of the white, European devil mind" Ted walks in and agrees (Everett 18). He comically says "the only thing that ever trickles down to poor people is rain, and that ain't much more than god's piss" (Everett 19). It is doubtful that someone with the level of wealth that the real-life Ted Turner has would be against an economic model that favors the rich. The dialogue comically subverts the ideological expectation the reader has towards Ted, affirming this character is not the man who founded CNN.

There is a similar moment of awareness a few pages later. Ted is out on his boat with Jane, Jane's niece (named Wanda Fonda,) Betty, and Not Sidney. Ted mentions Not Sidney's mother: "I wish I'd hired her, but, you know, I never thought to do that. Perhaps because I'm a privileged white male" (Everett 25). The same self-chastising is seen later on, when Not Sidney is in college: "Not to sound racist, which, being American I no doubt am" (Everett 116). Through these dialogues, Everett calls attention to implicit biases present in the mind of privileged white men through humor instead of condemnation. This choice is arguably more effective in the way it calls attention to the issue and provokes thought instead of creating a polemical stance against it.

Early in the book, there is a scene where Not Sidney and Ted talk outside. These moments are the closest that Ted comes to sincerely guiding Not Sidney. This interaction is not a dialogue as much as it is Not Sidney listening to Ted "rattling off figures and theories about television, not caring whether I understood or not" (Everett 11). Not Sidney says he "enjoyed our

one-sided chats and viewed them as important and essential to my education” (Everett 12). In this scene, Ted lays out his plan of televised desensitization of the country: “I’ll let the networks waste their money making the new trash. I’ll take their stale old crappy shows and air them again and again until they sit in peoples heads like jingles...that way we’ll all become desensitized to its harmful and consumptive effects by sheer overexposure” (Everett 12). Ted, despite being involved in television, is aware of its negative impacts. It is unlikely that the real life Ted Turner would admit to such thinking. A similar distaste for television is seen by Not Sidney's mother. Portia, despite her massive investment in Turner Broadcasting, calls the TV evil and wants Not Sidney to avoid it. Instead, she encourages him to read: "Read. Always read. No one can take that from you. The evil picture box [her name for the television] won't make you any smarter, but books will. Read. Read. Read.' And then she would lock me in my room with the *Britannica*" (Everett 16). This attitude is recalled later on when she goes on a tirade about *Leave it to Beaver*, a show that was considered a moral and wholesome standard-bearer for quite a time. She calls it "that propaganda...but of course that's what the box is for, isn't it? here is my black son sitting here in his black neighborhood watching some bucktoothed little rat and his washed-out, anally stabbed, Nazi-Christian parents" (Everett 137). These humorous speeches call attention to the shortcomings of modern media in its desire and subsequent failure to guide and educate a population.

This education with Ted is later referred to as “Lessons in nonsense” (Everett 81). The word nonsense is essential to an understanding of *I am Not Sidney Poitier*. The importance of nonsense can be seen through Everett’s self-named character in the book, as well as the author’s own thoughts on the word. In the book, Professor Everett teaches a course on nonsense. It is

through this venue that Not Sidney initially engages with him: "I decided to try and get into an upper-division English course titled the Philosophy of Nonsense by some guy named Percival Everett" (Everett 87). Percival Everett, the author, discusses his own interest in nonsense in an interview with *The Paris Review*:

I'm so interested in nonsense. In order to function, nonsense has to comply very rigidly to the rules of grammar and syntax. That's why we think it should mean something, because it seems like it should mean something even though it doesn't mean anything. What I want to do is write something that seems like it means something and doesn't. I want to write a novel that even I don't understand.

(Taylor 10)

An interest in nonsense, as opposed to order, marks a distinct difference between the philosophies of Dante and those of Everett. An interest in nonsense inherently points to the failures and shortcomings of structures used to convey order, such as syntax and grammar. The title of the story provokes this nonsense, and it is threaded throughout; this can be seen in things such as Not Sidney's name, the self-aware manipulation of language, and surreal dream sequences.

Educational Shortcomings:

Not Sidney lives in relative financial independence, where he pays all his expenses from his inheritance, but the payments to Turner are "funneled back to me through some kind of manipulation of stock options" (Everett 9). He has his own staff of cooks and teachers, "mostly

black women” (Everett 8). The head of the staff, Claudia, is depicted “with her massive afro and keen stare” (Everett 9). Here, Everett plays with racial signifiers that authors usually try to implement in a subtle way. Instead of playing this game, Everett makes the gestures explicit to highlight how unnecessary it is. Everett addresses this tactic in an interview with *Bookform*: “we’re all acculturated to read in this corrupt and biased way. If I don’t have a character comb his afro or cross 125th street at Lenox avenue in the first ten pages, for all purposes the reader is going to assume that character is white...It wasn’t my intention to catch anyone or make anyone feel shame, but just to call on how we do read” (Marcus 4). Everett calls attention to how readers read and what biases are ingrained. In doing this, the hope is that an astute reader will develop an awareness and be on the lookout for these tactics.

Not Sidney is taught by Betty, “a raving socialist” who “imagined that one day I might use my wealth for good” (Everett 9). She fails as a guide in the sense she lacks self-awareness. This is seen when she goes on her rants about empire and excess while eating fast food: “She taught me that America preached freedom yet would not allow anyone to be different. She usually told me all of this while stuffing her face with big greasy sandwiches from Hardee’s and greasier chicken from Popeyes” (Everett 9). She appears unaware that her vices are a byproduct of the things she dislikes, such as industry, empire, and private commercial conglomerates. Her speeches devolve from articulate to that of caricature. She dislikes Ted and presents this dislike in a fashion that is almost cartoonish: ““that man is the devil. You be careful around that white man. And around whitey in general...money be green, we be black, and the devil be white. That’s all we know and all we need to know. Trust me, your big-boned sister”” (Everett 10). This dialogue, like the description of Claudia, is meant to call attention to the overt signifiers some

authors rely on to indicate race in a character. In this case, instead of physical description, it is through stereotyped speech patterns. Through this depiction, Everett highlights how the tactic is more rapid than subtle in its approach, taking away from the individuality of a character.

Once in high school, Not Sidney encounters another failed educational guide. He has a history teacher named Miss Hancock, “unfortunate name and all” (Everett 30-31). Not Sidney and his friend Eddie compete for her attention in class. One day, she asks Not Sidney to help her move topsoil after school, then offering to perform oral sex on him, asking “do you know what fellatio is?” (Everett 31). Unlike the typical teenage boy fantasy, the experience is extremely unpleasant. She ends up biting him throughout, and Not Sidney is left physically and mentally uncomfortable. He tries to talk with Ted afterwards. Ted, in a way, gives him advice, advising him to turn her in and avoid contact, but it is shrouded in tangents about Italian shoes and tying knots one-handed. When Not Sidney asks “Is that fatherly advice?” Ted responds that “No, this is just advice from a fellow penis owner” (Everett 33). Even in narrative moments where authentic bonding or sentiment can present itself, it is denied and replaced by humor; nonsense triumphs over sentiment. Instead of presenting a guide who gives clear instructions, such as Virgil, Everett depicts guides who force the protagonist to come to their own conclusions.

Not Sidney is coaxed into going to Miss Hancock's house a second time. This interaction is comical, but sad above all else. This time around, Not Sidney is hyper-aware of the oddness of the situation and her home: “a quick glance around made me appreciate in what a confused state I'd been and to conclude that Miss Hancock was not like most people” (Everett 34). Most importantly, Not Sidney develops an awareness of her status as predator: “I unfastened my belt,

understanding at that moment how what was happening had nothing to do with sex, only and simply power, watching as she approached me like the predator she was" (Everett 36). Everett highlights the dark underside to a situation that is often glorified and romanticized. He calls attention to the dynamics that drive these actions in the real world, not the world of cinema.

Her failure as a guiding figure lies in her transgression of an expected role. A teacher is supposed to help people learn, help them grow and engage in ideas. In particular, a history teacher should provide a foundational understanding for how the world has operated on a sociological level. Instead, Miss Hancock uses Not Sidney for her own perverted aims. When Not Sidney tries to report her behavior, he is laughed at by the administration (which reveals another set of institutional shortcomings). No one believes him, and shame forces him to drop out of school. Discouraging education is perhaps the worst failure a teacher or an educational institution can commit. Everett aptly takes what is depicted as a idealized teenage male fantasy and portrays the not-so-savory reality of the situation. Not only what motivates a teacher to sleep with a student, Everett does a great job calling attention to the predatory nature of the act and the destructive consequences that follow. However, even amidst dark moments like these, Everett finds space to play with language: "the whole thing gnawed at me, much in the manner of Miss Hancock" (Everett 38). Everett uses the humor of linguistic manipulation to avoid any one situation gaining too much dramatic intensity. This is different from Dante, who uses language for the express purpose of intensifying dramatic moments.

Failed Guidance of State Institutions:

After dropping out of school, Not Sidney decides to take a road trip in an attempt to find himself. He sets out from Atlanta, and is subject to the harsh racism of the south, which first manifests in the police. Here, he encounters the failure of state institutions that, in their own words, are meant to protect and serve the population. Not Sidney is driving on the highway when he is pulled over by a "nine-foot tall, large-headed, large-hatted, mirror-sunglassed manlike thing" (Everett 46). The hyperbolic physical description is meant to foreshadow the hyperbolic interaction that follows. The officer entertains no pleasantries, and makes clear there will be trouble when the first words he says are "'hey, boy'" (Everett 46). Everett captures the multi-faceted implication of this fraught phrase: "Those were his exact words, though I cannot capture adequately his inflection. It was not a greeting as much as a threat, somehow a question, certainly an attack" (Everett 46). This derogatory phrase has been uttered to people of color throughout American history, and Everett articulates the varied emotions the phrase provokes.

The rest of the interaction goes as poorly as expected. Not Sidney is asked for his registration, and as he reaches into the glove compartment, the cop quickly pulls his gun on him. He throws him on the hood of the car and handcuffs him without explanation. When Not Sidney asks why he is arrested, the officer gives four reasons, each one consecutively less logical: "'sassin' an officer of the law, which around here is the same as resistin' arrest. Now, there's speedin' and failure to stop immediately when I turned on my light. And then there's bein' a n****r'" (Everett 48). The sight of this word in print is jarring and harsh, but that is the point. Everett talks about his use of this word in the context of teaching during an interview with *The Paris Review*: "I tell them, it's a word. They'd be ill advised to go use it in the neighborhood of USC, but in the context of the film [*Blazing Saddles*] and the understanding of the problems that

the film is addressing, it's every bit as valid as the use of [it] in *Huckleberry Finn*” (Taylor 16). Everett explains that the word points to the issue, the word directly highlights the issue. The inclusion of it in his book, with white people using the term in a derogatory way is meant to call attention to that exact issue of dehumanization.

This interaction also plays into questions of identity. Not Sidney struggles to define himself and find an identity the whole book. Here, while setting out to find himself, the encounter with the cops instead affirm a lack of individuality. They see a black man and act off their prejudice. This incident is even more interesting when one thinks of how his struggle for identity takes place amidst an uncanny resemblance to a particular, well known individual.

When Not Sidney arrives at the precinct, he is denied his "cliché one phone call" and sentenced to two years on a work farm "by a judge who also had the surname George and shared all physical features with Officer George" (Everett 48). While there, he faces all sorts of abuses. The whole scene is reminiscent of the absurdity of *The Trial*, except with overt tones of racism.

As quickly as the abuses begin, they end, when the prison bus fishtails and crashes. Not Sidney escapes, but he is still chained to another prisoner, Patrice, who "looks a little like that old movie star, Tony Curtis" (Everett 74). This situation is meant to recall *The Defiant Ones*, a film starring Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis. Everett parallels elements of the movie's plot, showing the pair escaping through the woods, crossing an icy stream, and coming into contact with a young boy living in the hills. In this case, the child's name is Bobo. Bobo and his blind sister, Sis, help the pair unchain themselves. Before they leave the house, Not Sidney falls asleep and has a dream that is a series of allusions to other movies Sidney Poitier stars in. In his dreams,

he inhabits roles that Sidney Poitier played. This can be seen as him slowly coming to identify with Sidney Poitier as a character, albeit subconsciously. Everett of course takes liberty to modify the details of the film plot and includes more humorous and absurd bits.

In the morning, Sis and Bobo agree to guide Not Sidney to the train back to Atlanta, on the condition that they can go with him. The situation forces him to agree: "I needed Bobo and therefore I needed Patrice, that was my conclusion, with a therefore and everything" (Everett 75). Luckily, he avoids this agreement coming to fruition because Bobo, Patrice, and Sis drink themselves unconscious on moonshine before the train arrives. The sensational ending of *The Defiant Ones*, with the duo running for the train in a dramatic fashion is replaced by Not Sidney climbing onto a freight train "moving very slowly up the grade" (Everett 79).

Not Sidney has a second encounter with the police later on in the book. This incident repeats the themes of senselessness and racism seen the first time around. While at a diner in Alabama, a cop walks in and immediately arrests Not Sidney on the grounds he is black. Like officer George, he uses pejorative terms like boy, uppity, and the N word. Not Sidney gets thrown into jail, and has a moment of terror that "I was in jail and being accused of murder" (Everett 205). He sort of stands up for himself when they continuously taunt him: "'I'm not a n****r...[and]don't call me boy'" (Everett 205-206). Unlike the first encounter, he is quickly dismissed and cleared of the accusation when the Chief confirms his alibi. The fact that he was arrested a second time for being black, in a different state than the first, points to an issue that is widespread and problematically common.

The difference between the first interaction with the cops and the second one is that after Not Sidney is cleared, the cops ask him to help them solve the crime and find the murderer. This is meant to recall another Sidney Poitier Movie, *In the Heat of the Night*. In the film, as in the story, a black man is asked to investigate a murder in a racially hostile town. In the novel, the Chief presents himself as subservient to Not Sidney: "you don't think you can help the dumb crackers?...stay around and show up the poor white folks" (Everett 213). Their sense of superiority crumbles, and the cops impose a savior-esque complex on Not Sidney. Not Sidney agrees to help, and enlists Ted and Professor Everett to assist him. Any humility or humanity that is seen in the police officers is lost when the cops repeat their racist stupidity by arresting Everett shortly after he arrives in Alabama. The officer says to the Chief that he "caught him snooping around the outside of the hardware store. He's a n****r, so I arrested him" (Everett 223). The abusive language and ungrounded assumptions point to how deep-seeded the irrationality of racism is.

Educational Shortcomings, Reprised:

When Not Sidney arrives home from his first attempt at a purposeful adventure, he feels like a failure. He says that "failure might have been too strong a term only because I hadn't had any real goals when I set out. That finally was my awakening, my revelation from that brief and both eye-opening and eye-closing experience, that I, sadly, had no direction in life, and my new mission became to discover some mission" (Everett 82). Unlike Dante, who has a clear-cut mission presented to him, Not Sidney has to find his own purpose. Each failed adventure is a learning experience, but none reveal a clear-cut purpose. Not Sidney optimistically thinks that

going to college will fulfill this yearning. He should know better than to think that sticking to conventions will him somewhere, but for the time being, he continues to believe in well-worn paths.

He gets in touch with a representative of the college through Ted's connections. The person he meets with is named Gladys Feet. Like his old teacher, she is taken by his likeness to Sidney Poitier and is attracted to him. Not Sidney muses on this, saying "She wasn't exactly kissing my ass and she wasn't exactly flirting with me, but with a little shove she'd have shit on her nose and I'd have a date" (Everett 85). Like Miss Hancock, Gladys fails to see Not Sidney as an individual, but instead sees him as an object of her own desires and aspirations. Not Sidney initially feels confident around her when they are discussing money, because he is the one in control. However, when she tries to seduce him, he quickly becomes uncomfortable and avoids further interaction.

It is at Morehouse that Not Sidney meets Professor Everett. Everett, instead of commenting on his likeness to Sidney Poitier, asks if "anybody ever tell you that you look like Harry Belafonte?" (Everett 87). From the get go, Professor Everett does not act conventional. The air of nonsense is reinforced by a portrait of Pinto Colvig, the first Bozo the Clown, hanging on the wall next to James Joyce and Terry McMillan. The professor reveres an icon of nonsense as much as he reveres canonical authors. Professor Everett, like the author, is interested in the construction and manipulation of language. At one point in the conversation, he says "I'm speaking metaphorically. Whatever that means" (Everett 86).

A glimmer of initial guidance can be seen when Everett asks Not Sidney, "are you a sheep, Mr. Poitier?" (Everett 89). When Not Sidney responds no, Professor Everett says "most sheep don't think they're sheep. I wonder what they think they are. Pigeons, Maybe" (Everett 89). Similar to interactions with Ted, an early moment of authentic advice is coated in nonsense. He adds to the nonsense as Not Sidney leaves: "Don't be a sheep Mr Poitier. Be anything, be a deer or a squirrel, a beaver or a gnu...be a gecko or a platypus. Be a panther or a sparrow, but not a sheep. Promise me that" (Everett 90). Sadly, Not Sidney does not listen, and pledges to join a frat. His desire to live within expectations supersedes some of the only authentic advice he has received in the novel.

Morris Chesney is the roommate Not Sidney lives with who pressures Not Sidney to pledge a fraternity. He is a failed guide in the way he fails to befriend Not Sidney or help him acclimate to school. Instead, he engages in the stereotypical abuse that comes from leaders in a fraternity, an organization that purports to guide people into adulthood. He asks Not Sidney to pledge Omega Psi Phi. Morris thinks he and the organization hold the keys for important opportunities, touting the rhetoric that "one brother got a job making six-figures right out of school" as if monetary aspirations matter to Not Sidney (Everett 94). Despite initially accepting the opportunity to pledge, Not Sidney is aware of how dumb the decision is: "they were simply what nature had made them, smart bullies. And yet, there I was, more fool me, because I wanted the *college* experience" (Everett 94). Here, Not Sidney articulates the motivations that most people have joining a fraternity: fulfilling an ideal portrayed as essential to college and individual growth.

Not Sidney is briefly subject to the whims of frat antics, until one day he Fezmerizes Morris. He uses this control, not to get himself into the frat or inflict revenge on his abusers, but to have the brothers start a recycling program on campus. The expected direction the plot could take is replaced by the comical and absurd. This decision facilitates funny scenes such as the brothers marching through campus collecting bottles and Not Sidney finding his room totally filled with cans and other recyclable materials. It is during this time Not says of himself, "I discovered that I too had a bit of a mean streak - a realization that left me both saddened and relieved" (Everett 109). It is through others failure and stupidity that Not Sidney is able to learn more about himself.

In his depiction of himself, Everett creates a professor who subverts classroom authority and satirizes elements of academia. During their first meeting, when asked what the class will be like, Professor Everett says he has no idea, giving a rambling answer filled with "who knows?...maybe...maybe...I don't know yet...I suppose...Probably" (Everett 89). Typically, one expects a professor to have a plan of approach for a semester, a series of lesson plans or even a general syllabus. This is an early indication that he will not be a conventional professor.

The first class Not Sidney attends class, he notes that Everett "was uttering gibberish, but what wasn't clear was whether he knew it" (Everett 100). There is clear satire of the superfluous language that professors use, such as a "epistemological discontinuity that is undoubtedly connected, or at the very least traceable, to an amalgam of very common yet highly unusual sociohistorical factors" (Everett 100). This is seen in another classroom scene, where "Everett talked on and on about a thing being self-identical, but failed at any turn to make a drop of sense.

He laughed over his assertion that contingency was necessary for the existence of necessary truth and laughed harder as he blabbed on about truth as a 'pliable vacuum of manipulated fragments of no whole entity'" (Everett 106). Everett (the author) calls attention to the way big words and jargon are used to make it seem like one is saying something, even if they're not. Not Sidney eventually asks what anything he's saying has to do with nonsense. Instead of giving a response, Everett says "'precisely...It shouldn't matter where you are, the cat's in the kitchen, the dogs in the car. There's an elephant singing pinkidee czar, and the old man is strumming the same old guitar.' He looked out the window. 'Dismissed'" (Everett 101). The lessons in nonsense aptly conclude with nonsense.

Later on, Not Sidney goes to his office to try and see if there was something he missed amidst the rambling. Here, Everett levels with Not Sidney in a fashion unexpected of people recently aquatinted: "'Listen, Mr. Poitier, I'm going to hip you to the truth. I'm a fraud, a fake, a sham, a charlatan, a deceiver, a pretender, a crook'" (Everett 101). Everett makes no airs of presenting himself as a sagacious guiding figure. In fact, he does quite the opposite, dismissing his own credibility. Professor Everett makes explicit to Not Sidney that his job is to confuse: "'If you're confused then I've done my job and so I don't have a problem'" (Everett 112). However, this goal of confusing doesn't make his actions "'meaningless'" as Not Sidney asks (Everett 101). By drawing attention to nonsense in an explicit way, Professor Everett calls attention to the nonsense that surrounds day-to-day life. An understanding of nonsense comes in handy as Not Sidney deals with the fraternity, the police, and the family of his girlfriend, Maggie.

Everett (the author) also pokes at the way academics will talk about things they themselves are uneducated on. When talking to Not Sidney, Professor Everett says, "I think you should read Althusser and Habermas. I've never read them myself. Well, I've tried, but I didn't get it. Something about ideology functioning to obscure the real conditions of existence or some shit. That's what someone told me" (Everett 102). High-brow material is relegated to "some shit," and the idea that professors are walking encyclopedias is thrown out the window.

Despite the seeming senselessness of his classroom experiences, Not Sidney finds himself "thinking about class, though I was hard pressed to know what I was thinking about the class. I did know that somehow I felt as if I had been tricked into thinking that existence was a thing instead of an attribute, and then I wondered why I was thinking like that" (Everett 107). Not Sidney has his critical faculties sparked. He does exactly what Percival Everett (the author) wants a critical reader to do. In an interview with the *Paris Review*, he says, "The fun [of reading] is in thinking and the pleasure of thought" (Taylor 12). An answer is not as important as the thinking that occurs along the way. An answer can solve a question, but a change in thinking can have long-term benefits and change the way one approaches countless things in life.

The culmination of academic satire occurs when Everett issues an examination to the class after saying there wouldn't be tests. he says "There are three questions, and I urge you to divide your time unevenly on them, as they are of equal value. Since one hundred is not divisible by three, there is no way for you to achieve a perfect score. Unless of course we decide that ninety-nine is a perfect score, and I wouldn't mind that at all" (Everett 113). The exam questions are full of the same superfluous language that fills his lectures:

1) Imagine a radical and formidable contextualism that derives a hypostatization of language and that it anticipates a liquefied language, a language that exists only in its mode of streaming. How is a speaker to avoid the pull into the whirl of this non-oriented stream of language?

2) Is the I ones body? Is fantasy the spectacular image? and what does this have to do with the Borromean knot? in other words, why is there no symptom too big for its britches?

3) How might it feel to burn with missionary zeal? Don't be shy in your answer

(Everett 113)

These questions throw the students into a tizz. Not Sidney observes faces "with varying degrees of confusion, panic, and anger" setting off to work on the questions, trying to make sense out of nonsense (Everett 113). However, Not Sidney refuses to treat the questions as though they are serious: "I read the questions over and over and after the numbers 1 and 2 on my paper I wrote, *I dont know*. After the number 3 I wrote *Awful*, then added, *damn it*" (Everett 113). These non-answers show Not Sidney has in fact learned something from this class and his conversations with Everett. He has learned not to be a sheep, just as he was guided to. Just because he is in a classroom and is given a test does not mean he should treat it with the expected weight. The test manifests this lesson in an odd sidelong way, but nonetheless proves he has been guided and has grown. This indirect, roundabout guidance is polar opposite to the direct approach and straightforward directions that Virgil gives Dante.

During a meeting, Not Sidney asks Professor Everett if the course is "some kind of object lesson," some kind of performance piece (Everett 112). This question sets up a whole realm of irony and satire that the section can occupy, clarifying the nonsense as a post-modern sort of commentary on how life is a performance. However, since this is a professor of nonsense who refuses to concede to expectations, he replies: "That's good. I'd never considered that. You're a lot smarter than me" (Everett 112). Like the author, Professor Everett refuses to concede to any expected path a story can take. He favors confusion over clarity, preferring a section that leaves the reader confused over one that neatly wraps itself up.

After deciding to leave college, Not Sidney decides to "call professor Everett to see if he could offer any good argument for my staying put. Why I held his opinion in any regard was beyond me, but I did" (Everett 164). Despite underplaying his credentials, Not Sidney still finds the professor to be a source of information and guidance. Everett is unable to convince him to remain in school. When Not Sidney makes the appeal "you're a professor" he replies "if you say so" (Everett 165). Professor Everett constantly subverts his position as one to give advice, undermining the weight of his own opinion. Not Sidney calls attention to the obvious: "for some reason, maybe because you're a professor, I thought you'd try to talk me into staying" (Everett 166). Professor Everett humorously replies "it's a bitch ain't it? The things we assume" (Everett 166). That line might be the one sentence summary of the entire novel: the things we assume do more to hurt than help us. Before Not Sidney leaves he asks the pivotal question of "why are people so fucked up?" (Everett 167). Here is perhaps the only time Everett is sincere: "you want to know why people are so fucked up? Son, that's about the only question I can answer with even a small measure of authority. It's because they're people. People, my friend, are worse than

anybody" (Everett 167). Not Sidney reflects on this, asking himself "whether I was troubled more by his answer or by the fact that he had called me son" (Everett 167). When a moment of authenticity is portrayed, it is shied away from, this time on the part of the guided figure instead of the guide.

Another failed guide who is encountered briefly at Morehouse is none other than Bill Cosby. Here, Percival Everett (the author) really digs into Cosby, ripping into the vapidness of his personality and rhetoric. He takes things Cosby has said over the years and strings them together into a raving convocation speech:

"You're all pathetic...I sell Pudding Pops for the white man. I don't know why I'm saying that, but I am. I make myself sick, but the white man is not to blame...Pound cake. I'm on television. Black girls have babies by three or four fathers and why? Pudding Pops! that's what I'm saying...Pudding Pops!...Babies having babies. Pound cake...I've been on television since nineteen sixty-two. I kissed a Japanese woman on screen in nineteen sixty-six and managed not to have a baby with her. I want to thank you for having me here today, and I want you to know I will be more than happy to sign copies of my book, *Fatherhood*, which is on sale just outside at an attractive discount."

(Everett 96-97)

The public address is an attempt by Morehouse to present Cosby as a moral authority. Everett pokes fun at how Cosby is not qualified to speak as one. Cosby attempts to set himself up as an arbiter of what it means to be a successful black man. There was major backlash to this during the height of his fame, and now, with him in jail for sexual crimes, it is clear his attempts

at preaching morality were as empty as everyone thought. Cosby wants to be a guide to lead African-Americans out of what he sees as social dysfunction, and into what he sees as success through a monolithic vision of how African-Americans should act. Percival Everett, writing before Cosby's conviction, still draws attention to the emptiness of monolithic racial guidance in a post-modern moment. He highlights the failure of static, stable categories as a realm to occupy. In this takedown, Everett proposes that all blanket categorizations are diminutive and unproductive. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, he speaks further on the problems of monolithic representation: "There are experiences of black Americans, and those experiences are as wide and varied as those of white Americans" (Taylor 17). He continues by arguing if all racial categories experience the same thing, than "one would go into the bookstore and see the White Male American Books section...but even as I say it you can see how idiotic that would be" (Taylor 17). Here, he calls to attention the implicit labels found in genre classification. By creating a "black" authors section, it tacitly demarcates a deviation from mainstream (white) authors. Everett clarifies that although labels are reductive, he wouldn't go as far as to dismiss the acknowledgement of different racial experiences altogether: "That said, every novel has in it the people who experience the world that's depicted. Some of those characters will be white and some will be black, and that will inform not only what they experience, but how the reader experiences the novel. And that shouldn't have anything to do with the label placed on the book" (Taylor 17). He makes the point that it is important to acknowledge and be aware of the difference in experience, the reality that different races have different experiences. However, he opposes having that difference serve as a marketing tool, or act as the basis a book is founded on, arguing that it robs the book of its full literary merit.

Failure of Monolithic Representations:

While at Morehouse, Not Sidney briefly dates a girl named Maggie, and her family embodies the Cosby model of a professional, successful, well-to-do black family. When he meets them, he sees that their status comes at the cost of self-loathing. This self-loathing manifests in a snobby elitism and a hypocrisy towards institutions they benefited from, such as affirmative action. The Larkin family represents failed guidance because they are the byproduct of failed guidance, and they are unable to see this failure. They represent the harmful cost of attempts to meet singular definitions of happiness and success.

The Larkin's live in a lavish home, a "midsixties' split level with a three car garage and an expanse of lawn that seemed somewhat ridiculous" (Everett 126). The idealization of home ownership and wealth signifiers such as a large garage and lawn are more excessive than they are impressive. Upon entering, Not Sidney is introduced to Violet, who "cooks and cleans...she took care of my sister and me when we were little" (Everett 127). Maggie denies that violet is a housekeeper when Not Sidney asks, seemingly unaware of her privilege and Violet's position of servitude. Violet's self-loathing is the saddest of them all, because she is stuck on the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, and appears to accept it. She doesn't realize how wealthy Not Sidney is, and in turn, she acts like he is beneath them, unworthy of Maggie: "'listen boy, Mister and Missus have worked too hard...to have a black boy like you come around Miss Maggie'" (Everett 154). Not Sidney tries to level with her: "'listen to yourself, Violet. Mister and Missus and Miss Maggie. This is not the antebellum south and you are not a house slave'" (Everett 155). His attempt at honesty and insight result in her (of all people) calling him the N word. Not Sidney

points out they "are pretty much the same color," which she denies, saying "I'm milk chocolate and you're dark cocoa, dark as Satan" (Everett 155). This pigmentational hairsplitting is terrible. Not Sidney feels "stunned [and] saddened perhaps, somewhat frightened, but mostly just stunned" (Everett 155). Violent intensely buys into the hierarchy of race, placing a high value on skin color. Hearing her thoughts does not provoke anger the way it does with Maggie's parents; it is just sad she lets herself be kept down. Later on, during thanksgiving prayers, she is referred to as "'the help'" by the Reverend in attendance (Everett 159). Not Sidney calls attention to this in his parting speech, when he says he dislikes the Larkin family "because your *help* has yet to sit down and enjoy any of her own cooking" (Everett 162). This evidently wins her affection, because as he leaves the house Violet hands him "a paper sack" of leftovers and says "'you might get hungry later'" (Everett 162). Despite her initial hate towards him, Not Sidney standing up for her shows her an important lesson in solidarity and not denying who you are as a person.

Maggie's mother Ruby is an embodiment of hypocrisy and the extent people are willing to go for money. She is a black woman who makes a living by hurting other black people as the head of "'a conservative think tank'" (Everett 128). Maggie explains to Not Sidney that "she testifies before congress and goes on television all the time talking about conservative issues. She's trying to get rid of the welfare system because it keeps black people down and to stop gay rights because it endangers the family structure and keeps black people down and to abolish affirmative action because it teaches special preference and keeps black people down. That sort of stuff" (Everett 128). Despite the fact that the mother "'grew up dirt poor'" she is willing to make a career out of keeping other people marginalized (Everett 129). The paratactic sentence structure lacking any punctuation, followed by a terse conclusion captures the feeling that

Maggie has recited this description many times over, perhaps without understanding the implications.

Maggie's father Ward (note the name) "cut[s] a distinctly unimpressive figure" and, like his wife, is a similar embodiment of hypocrisy (Everett 132). He tries to assert himself in a classic compensatory fashion when he first meets Not Sidney: "I shook his hand and paid particular attention to the fact that his grip was overly firm and that he was slow to let go" (Everett 132). His initial address to Not Sidney is ripe with racial undertones: "'Welcome to our home,'...and though he didn't say it, I heard the word *boy*" (Everett 132). This recalls the interactions with the police and other prejudiced figures, showing how a derogatory, prejudicial tone is felt, even implicitly.

Ward tries his hardest to deny his blackness and present himself as "nothing but an American," saying to Not Sidney, "'I'm one-sixteenth Black, an Eighth Irish, two-fifths Choctaw, one thirty-second Dutch, a quarter English, and a ninth German...I'm no needy minority. Do you understand?'" (Everett 134). His obsession with his genealogy clearly denotes a desire to distance himself from how he could be perceived. Ward asks Not Sidney if he has a desire to go to Africa and whether he considers himself African. Not Sidney remarks that "these were not difficult questions, but they were confusing. However, I was not so young, naive, and stupid that I could not spot a classic case of self-loathing" (Everett 133). Ward has sadly bought into notions of African inferiority and tries his hardest to deny any connection to the continent. After this odd first interaction, Maggie defends her father to Not Sidney using the same rhetoric she used with her mother: "'My father has gone through a lot to get where he is. From dirt poor

Alabama to Yale" (Everett 137). The repetition of "dirt poor" shows a use of certain buzz words to convey a point, a tactic common in politics.

Later on, Not Sidney overhears Ruby and Ward talking about him through "the listening device that was the heating vent" (Everett 131). They disapprove of how dark he is, and theorize that his name is "some kind of ghetto nonsense, no doubt" (Everett 131). They gave their daughters "proper" Christian names and see Not Sidney's name as a transgression of this propriety. He overhears them a second time, after they discover how rich he is: "he can buy and sell everyone we know a couple times over" (Everett 144). Because he is rich, Ward wants to treat him well and have him marry Maggie. Ruby protests that "he's so dark...he's so black...[and] our little girl. She's so fair" (Everett 144-145). Ward says "we might have to overlook that," revealing that money is the most important priority (Everett 145). The couple moves from one form of objectification to another. First, Not Sidney is dismissed on the basis of his skin, and then he is praised, if not fetishized, for his wealth.

After these interactions, Not Sidney pieces together why he was invited to Thanksgiving in the first place. He realizes that "on some level, or even a particular level, my presence was serving a desired end, namely to upset her parents. She had to know, and I'm certain she did, that even the simple matter of dark skin would be a cause of consternation for her parents" (Everett 136-137). He concludes that Maggie's choice to go to Spellman is a similar affront to her parents. Maggie's sister Anges later states this explicitly when she says Maggie "just brought him home to mess with because of his dark skin" (Everett 146). His tokenistic presence is reinforced when he meets Maggie's friends, all of whom come from the same sort of privileged background: "I

had a sneaking realization, however incapable I was at articulating it, that my presence was essential to them, not in some singular specific way, but in a broad and pervasive and insidious way that none of them would or could understand or acknowledge" (Everett 141). He is aware of the way his darkness validates what they try to disregard in themselves, how it points to what they and their family try to distance themselves from.

In an attempt to understand what is going on and what he should do, Not Sidney calls Ted, who, to no surprise, is of little help. He then calls Professor Everett, and gets a lot more advice. Everett of course begins with his usual nonsense but offers some words of wisdom, primarily that Not Sidney should follow his own instincts and not rely on him for an answer: "well, if you know [what to do], then why are you calling me? all I can do is tell you that your assessment is correct" (Everett 148). Professor Everett then says, "I say you sit back and have some fun at their expense...just remember that nothing puts you at an advantage like knowing what someone is thinking when they don't know you know what they're thinking" (Everett 149). A higher degree of awareness facilitates a stronger command of a situation.

Thanksgiving dinner is a sight of conflict, but also one where Not Sidney stands up for himself. Before the meal, Not Sidney meets Reverend Golightly, his wife and their son Jeffery, who is albino and mentally challenged. Jeffery has the lightest skin, what everyone around him desires, but because he is mentally challenged, that is the last thing he cares about: "sweet innocent Jeffery, completely lacking pigment and outside the bizarre game altogether" (Everett 156). Everyone around him is so focused on being as close to white as they can; he is even more white than a lot of white people, but it couldn't matter less to him.

A conversation disparaging affirmative action leads Not Sidney to speak up at the dinner table and put the Larkin family and their guests in their place. He bursts their fictions bubble of meritocracy. He calls attention to the probability that Maggie's ex-boyfriend Robert got into Dartmouth because of the legacy of his father also attending the university. He also points out that Ward was likely the beneficiary of affirmative action when he went to law school. Not Sidney pays tribute to his mother's attitude when he says "she didn't want to be white. More importantly, she didn't want to be not black" (Everett 162). Not Sidney explicitly states what these people have been sidestepping in all their conversations and actions.

The racial resentment that occurs in this section, and the choice setting of domestic dining affairs alludes to another Sidney Poitier film, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* In the film, the values of a do-good white liberal family who promote racial equality are put to the test when their daughter announces her engagement to a black man. Everett ironically displaces this structure by making the girlfriend's family black, but as (if not more) hostile than a white family would be to person of darker complexion than their daughter. In the film, there is a happy ending where the white people see the error of their ways and bless the marriage. Everett, in classic Everett fashion, denies this sentimentality and uses the scene as an opportunity to comically critique racial self-loathing.

During the prayers before the meal, Not Sidney realizes he doesn't believe in God: "it was not until this moment in my life that I realized I did not believe in a god. My mother had talked quite insultingly about Christians and Christianity...but I had never, I guess, cared enough to contemplate the question" (Everett 158). Although tangential, this is important to note because it

highlights a distinct difference between Not Sidney and Dante. A fierce belief in God and a determined goal of salvation is what motivates Dante through the *Inferno* and the rest of *The Divine Comedy*. The entire work takes place within a deeply religious context. In comparison, *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* occupies a completely secular realm. There is no underlying belief system that governs Not Sidney's thoughts and actions. This lack of religion points to the failure of the institution. Religion is one of the main institutions of guidance people rely on, but in his portrayal of Not Sidney as an Atheist, Everett highlights a Post-Modern disillusionment with religion. It is important that we learn of this atheism before Not Sidney makes his second journey from Atlanta and encounters the convent of Sisters in Alabama.

Failures of Religious Guidance:

Upon returning from his disastrous time with the Larkin Family, Not Sidney decides to attempt a second venture to California. Here, he acknowledges that the destination isn't the purpose, but instead, that the journey is what matters most: "I realized that I could simply board a plane to California, but being there wasn't the point, getting there was what I was after. I didn't know anyone there or what I would do and so the drive would afford me time to formulate some kind of plan" (Everett 168). This lack of destination is antithetical to that of Dante. Dante did not tour the underworld for the fun of it; he would not subject himself to the experiences he went through just for kicks. In this discussion, Not Sidney satirically calls attention to what motivates people to make trips and journeys. He says "I still harbored the young, romantic, naive, and stupid notion that a cross-country trek would be a valuable learning experience, a rite of passage"

(Everett 168). Here, Everett makes fun of the idea of learning something from a journey in a car, subverting a classic 20th century American trope (ie Kerouac's *On the Road*).

Not Sidney's car breaks down on a dirt road by a house occupied by Sisters from "the Church of the Ever-Holy Pentecost of Our Savior Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (Everett 172). Having the Sisters state the full name of their fictions denomination of Pentecostalism calls attention to the long-winded titles religious denominations adopt to distinguish themselves from one another. Before he gets out of the car, Not Sidney deduces their problematic perception of him in terms of race and stature: "I thought I could read her lips and I thought she said, 'thank you god for sending me a black buck'" (Everett 170). Through this moment, Everett portrays the selfishness of divine will. Divine will is portrayed in such a positive light in the *Inferno*, a motivating tool and underlying force that secures purpose to the journey. Here, it is portrayed negatively, showing a conceit on the part of the faithful. They interpret coincidence as something fitting in with their own narrative.

The Sisters have a bossy and demanding tone towards Not Sidney, with a conviction that God is on their side and therefore what they want and need is right. They command Not Sidney to fix their roof. After saying he could try, they reply "'You will do more than try. You will do it'" (Everett 170). This same commanding tone is seen when they tell Not Sidney he will fix their fence and build their church. The plot elements and these characterizations point to yet another Sidney Poitier film, *Lilies of the Field*. The film also depicts a black man whose car breaks down by a group of nuns attempting to establish a church. Like the film, the novel depicts the

objectification of the man's handiness and arrogance of the women's belief that their perceptions and aims are sanctioned by God.

Later that night, when Not Sidney sits down to eat with them, their prayers call attention to their objectification and hubris: "Dear Jesus, thank you for this day, this bread, our roof, and our new big man, and he is a black man just like William J Seymour...you have sent him to us to help us in our mission" (Everett 172). Instead of recognizing him as an individual, they see him as a signifier of William Seymour, who was involved in the early founding of Pentecostalism. When Not Sidney tells them he will leave the following morning, there is a humorous back and forth that highlights the egotism of divine will in contrast to secular reasoning:

"I'll be leaving in the morning," I said.

Sister Irenaeus shook her head. "I don't think so"

I didn't know what to say so I said nothing.

"God has sent you to us."

"He didn't mention it to me.'

"He wouldn't."

"He might."

"He wouldn't."

(Everett 173)

The Sisters superimpose their aims over his intended journey. They think using him to fulfill their goals is more important than allowing him to do what he set out to do in the first place. The

same thing happens in *Lilies of the Field*, where the sisters believe the black man was sent for their own aims. In reality, both encounters hinge on coincidence, but they are interpreted as fulfillment of divine will.

When Not Sidney leaves, he feels kind of bad, but not really. He stops at a local diner, where he considers financing the church:

The thought of it was repulsive in some ways, since I found religion generally offensive and off-putting...But my impetuous, abrupt, and inexplicable desire to assist the forlorn sisters had nothing to do with a god, religion, a sudden onset of a messiah complex or/and certainly not my own (perhaps, sadly needed) salvation. It had simply to do with a newfound and fairly ironic way to spend my ridiculously easy-to-come-by money.

(Everett 185)

Here, when a potential purpose of his journey presents itself, it is denied. The sentimental trope of a rich philanthropist helping a religious organization and finding their own faith in the process is subverted in favor of ironic self-entertainment. The potential development of a messiah complex is explicitly pointed out and denied. What is interesting to think about is how if Not Sidney did develop this messiah complex, it would be the opposite of the stereotypical depiction. Usually, some American or European philanthropist goes to South America or Africa and funds a school or church; for the races to be reversed would create a thoughtful commentary, but Everett denies this path because it would still conform to a sentimentalism he seeks to avoid.

This denial of sentimentality distances the text from *Lilies of the Field*, where the protagonist slowly comes to sympathize for the Nuns and wants to help them achieve their goals.

When Not Sidney returns to tell the Sisters he will fund the church, he is aware of how they will interpret his return, but does such nonetheless: "of course my return could only be construed as prayers answered, and who was I to dispute this belief? after all, my complete faith in the nonexistence of their god notwithstanding, I was at a loss to explain my reappearance" (Everett 186). When Sister Irenaeus asserts that "God has sent you," Not Sidney wittily replies that "no, bad judgment has sent me" (Everett 187). He wants to simply cut a check and exit for good, but none of the Sisters have a bank account, and Not Sidney is forced to withdraw the money for them.

Upon his second return, Not Sidney notices "there was something different" about the Sisters (Everett 197). When they pompously ask "do you have *our* money?" Not Sidney immediately regrets undertaking this mission in the first place (Everett 197). Their arrogance is a blatant affront to the reality of the situation: "God has sent you with our money" (Everett 200). They are not grateful to him in his decision to fund the venture, but rather see him as the one who facilitates what is theirs to begin with. They pray for what they want to get.

The Sisters are visibly disappointed when Not Sidney says he'll only give the money in bits to them. It becomes increasingly obvious that their only intention is to secure the money. This monetary prioritization manifests itself in a gruesome way when Not Sidney learns someone who looks like him was murdered. He suspects, and although it is never explicitly confirmed, it is implied that the Sisters and Thornton Scrunchy (the architect they hired) are the

culprits: "He [Thornton] killed that man because he thought he [the murder victim] was me. Someone is dead because of me. Because of my stupidity" (Everett 229). The purpose of the journey manifests as a redemption story: Not Sidney has to go after them to make up for accidentally facilitating harm to a stranger.

After a storm ravages the town, Not Sidney sets out to recover the money he hid. He sees Sister Irenaeus and Thornton Scrunchy gathering up the money from "the crooks of tree branches, in puddles, on the muddy ground" after the storm blew it from the hiding space (Everett 228). When Not Sidney sees her, he notes that "she looked wild eyed, nothing like the woman I had met before" (Everett 228). She is seized by the spirit of money, the fervor of cash. The pair attempts to escape, but they are found dead by the highway, having crashed their truck into a telephone pole. Not Sidney has one last poke at religion when he sees their dead bodies: "All four eyes were wide open and staring into what I believe the sisters would have called the afterlife - into what my mother would have called nothing" (Everett 230). The Sisters failed to live by true Christian principles, and their greed gets them killed. Their religious principles fall short of their monetary desires, and through this greed, Everett highlights how the sentiments of religion are often undercut by secular priorities and desires.

Importance of Names and Lack of Resolution:

The name of the titular character is one that Everett constantly has fun playing with. The choice is meant to call attention to how something is read versus how it is heard. His name is not Not, but Not Sidney. This is specified in the text: "“Is your name really Not?’ 'Not Sidney,' I corrected her”" (Everett 84). The confusion over his name is an essential point of the story. The

confusion points to the duality of any rhetorical structure, where the "not" implies a positive and the positive implies a "not."

The origin of his name, like the origin of his birth, is comical in nature: "I never knew the story of my name. One might have thought that my mother imagined that our name, rare as it was, was enough to cause confusion with Sidney Poitier, the actor, and so I was to be *Not* Sidney Poitier" (Everett 7). However, when he asks her about this, she has a "puzzled expression" that "led me to believe that my name had nothing to do with the actor at all, that *Not Sidney* was simply a name she had created, with no consideration of the outside world. She liked it, and that was enough" (Everett 7). As seen with many events in the text, there is a comical refusal to concede to the obvious, instead favoring the absurd.

Not Sidney's name is a source of trouble for him throughout the text. This is seen early on, where he gets beat up for his name. It is a source of confusion, and the other boys think he is making fun of them. Reflecting on this, he says "they were understandably and justifiably frustrated and angry with me" (Everett 14). His calm tone and seeming understanding of it not only shows maturity, but also shows an acceptance of the absurdity of his condition. He is still beat up for it in high school, because people think he is lying.

His name is also a source of humor: Throughout the novel, Everett plays with the perception, punctuation, and processing of Not Sidney's name. An early example occurs with his tutor Betty. He asks her, "'are you saying that 'you did not' or that 'you did, Not?'" (Everett 11). Like the old lesson about punctuation, "lets eat Grandma" versus "lets eat, Grandma," Everett calls attention to the way subtle elements of syntax create differences of interpretation.

The confusion over his name persists throughout the book. When he meets Robert, Maggie's ex-boyfriend, there is an extended dialogue attempting to clarify his name:

"My name is Not Sidney," I said

"Not is a part of Not Sidney's name," Maggie said

"Knot, with a k?" He asked

"Not with a k" I said

"That's what I said" he said

"N-O-T," Maggie said

"Sidney?"

"My name is not Sidney. My name is Not Sidney. Call me Not Sidney."

Though he was the one being dense, I was the one in the middle, feeling stupid, trying to explain the unexplainable. And for no good reason.

(Everett 139-140)

Here, Everett draws attention to the difference in verbal and visual processing of words, as well as having fun with homonyms.

When Not Sidney attends Morehouse, his roommate Morris calls attention to the not / Not duality. "'What kind of stupid-ass name is Not...excuse me, Not Sidney. Ill say you're not Sidney'" (Everett 92). This name-calling is important because without realizing it, Morris points out "that not only was I Not Sidney Poitier, but also that I was not Sidney Poitier" (Everett 92). His name, aside from being a confusing source of identity, also signifies a negation; who he is

also implies who he is not. Professor Everett also acknowledges this distinction: "I know, I know, you're Not Sidney Poitier and also not Sidney Poitier, but in a strange way you are Sidney Poitier as much as you're anyone" (Everett 102). He highlights how this duality factors into Not Sidney's identity. In a conversation shortly before the semester ends, Professor Everett muses on this distinction further. He says, "be yourself" (Everett 124). When Not Sidney asks "who else would I be," Professor Everett replies "I don't know. You might decide that all of a sudden you're Sidney Poitier. You're not though...But seriously, you have to know you look more like Sidney Poitier than Sidney Poitier ever did" (Everett 124). Professor Everett highlights a logic of double negatives that returns later on in the book. This occurs after Not Sidney looks at the murder victim who physically resembles him, so much so that he is convinced it is him: "as we stepped out of the makeshift morgue I thought that if the body in the chest was Not Sidney Poitier, then I was not Not Sidney Poitier and that by all I knew of logic and double negatives, I was therefore Sidney Poitier. I was Sidney Poitier" (Everett 212). He comes to accept his identity through denying his own.

Not Sidney, aside from sharing a name with the actor, has a physical resemblance to Sidney Poitier that many people comment on. His resemblance to Sidney Poitier facilitates the advances made by his teacher: "it soon became evident that my emerging resemblance to Sidney Poitier was not lost on her" (Everett 30). In the same chapter, the principle comments on his resemblance: "'you know, you're looking more and more like that Sidney Poitier every day'" (Everett 37). Later, when he meets with a representative of Morehouse: "'I can't get over how much you look like Sidney Poitier. A young Sidney Poitier'" (Everett 84). The physical

similarity is important because it facilitates the end sequence of the book, when he is mistaken for Sidney Poitier and brought to the Oscars.

After the shenanigans in Alabama conclude, Not Sidney flies to LAX. Upon arrival, he sees a driver with "a placard that read *Sidney Poitier*" (Everett 231). The driver asks him, "'are you not Sidney Poitier?'" (Everett 231). Given that he cannot hear whether the "not" is capitalized, he responds in the affirmative. He is taken to the Beverly Hills Hotel, where "stale glitz and money conspired to make me feel uncomfortable" (Everett 231). Everyone there mistakes him for Sidney Poitier, and he doesn't bother to correct the mistake. In the hotel room, he watches *For the Love of Ivy*, a Sidney Poitier movie that Sidney Poitier also wrote. Instead of saying that he looks like Sidney Poitier, he says he "watched a man [on TV] who looked for the world like me" (Everett 232). In saying that Sidney Poitier looks like him, he asserts his own identity over his resemblance to the actor.

There is a final bit of fun with the not / Not distinction as he leaves the hotel: a woman asks for his autograph. He signs it "*Not Sidney Poitier*" the woman, whose name is Evelyn, asks, "'You're not Sidney Poitier?'" he responds "I am" (Everett 232). The whole point with the fun of this wordplay is that it is only evident on the page. Verbally, the two sound the same; the reader is the only one in on the joke with Not Sidney.

In a final bit of denying sentimentality, Not Sidney has a chauffeur detour through his old neighborhood to his childhood home. This could be the apex of the book, the beatific vision of home, but, instead, "It was less profound for me than I had imagined" (Everett 233). There is another family living there, showing that life goes on. While there, he muses on memory: "I

wanted to hear my mother's voice, but it never came...I could smell my mothers cookies...I could see the flow of her open housecoat...but I couldn't hear her voice" (Everett 233). Although certain senses of memory return, he cannot capture what he truly wants.

When he is brought to the Shrine Auditorium, the venue for the Oscars, Not Sidney finds himself in a place of existential confusion: "I didn't understand a word that was said to me. But of course I was there. Was I Not Sidney Poitier or was I not Sidney Poitier?" (Everett 233). There is a certain dramatic irony that amidst he confusion, trying to grapple with his identity, the award that he is given is "to a man that sets the standard" (Everett 234). Indeed, Sidney Poitier has set the standard for comparisons the entire book.

Not Sidney is presented with an Oscar for "'Most Dignified Figure in American Culture'" (Everett 234). This fictions award facilitates the speech that closes out the book:

"I came back to this place to find something, to connect with something lost, to reunite if not with my whole self, then with a piece of it. What I've discovered is that this thing is not here. In fact, it is nowhere. I have learned that my name is not my name. It seems you all know me and nothing could be further from the truth and yet you know me better than I know myself, perhaps better than I can know myself. My mother is buried not far from this auditorium, and there are no words on her headstone. As I glance out now, as I feel the weight of this trophy in my hands, as I stand like a specimen before these strangely unstrange faces, I know finally what should be written on that stone. It should say what mine will say: I AM NOT MYSELF TODAY."

(Everett 234)

The concluding speech points to the ultimate shortcomings of goals and aspirations in a fractured world. Not Sidney has tried to make a journey of purpose, tried to find meaning, to make the parts whole. However, the results have only fragmented and confused him more. The uncanny similarity and the surreal situation lead to an acceptance that his name is not his name. It is not part of his identity, it is an empty signifier that points to the actor and not his personal identity. There is not a defined conclusion to the story the way there is in Dante's work. Instead, the reader is left grappling a series of questions that ultimately remain unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

After assessing these texts, what conclusions can be drawn about guidance? For starters, guidance is a reciprocal act; one cannot be guided unless they want to be. Dante would not have been guided by Virgil unless he accepted a need for guidance. Similarly, the only successful moments of guidance that Not Sidney encounters happen when he is looking for and willing to recognize and receive help. Guidance cannot take the form of strict dictation or all of the work being forced upon the guide. As much as Virgil offers complete explanations for the underworld, Dante has to talk to people and come to his own understanding of sin. In the same fashion, Not Sidney only comes to terms with himself through his own adventures and experiences. He would

not reach the same conclusions if Everett or Ted Turner simply told him what he should do with his life or how he should perceive himself.

Another important conclusion that can be drawn from the two texts involves the construction and presentation of language. Dante, a poet, seeks to use language to the fullest extent possible. He works with imagery and figuration to heighten his depictions of the underworld and create more dramatic tension in moments of great intensity. For example, he compares Satan's wings to a "far-off windmill turning its huge sails / when a thick fog begins to settle in, / or when the light of day begins to fade" (Canto XXXIV, ll 4-6). When his language fails, it is not a failure of the language, but rather a failure to have the words that are needed available: "there are no words to tell you how I felt" (Canto XXXIV, 24). His goal is to point to things that are beyond language's ability to capture. God, as the ultimate signifier, cannot be put into language, but the authority of God can authorize and validate the use of language to the furthest possible extent.

In contrast, Everett, well versed in deconstructive theory, sees language as something that always points to something else, creating an endless feedback loop of signifiers that ultimately signify nothing. His awareness of language in this sense facilitates a playful manipulation of syntax and figuration. Language falls short intentionally: "her screams filled the streets like screams" (Everett 5). Instead of using figuration to heighten moments of great intensity, he undercuts them in a meta-like fashion: "Silence fell on the table like a bad simile" (Everett 161). Moments of drama are given a humorous undertone, and Everett calls attention to the literary devices used to achieve this effect. These devices that are typically used in a subtle way are

brought to the forefront by both the narrator and the characters. For example, during a conversation with Not Sidney, Ted says, "And I want to apologize again about this abstruse arrangement. Boy that's a lot of a's in one sentence" (Everett 12). Alliteration is typically used to create a subtle rhythm to a line, and Everett instead calls the readers attention to the device. The goal of this tactic is to development a higher awareness towards the composite elements of speech and writing.

This awareness of linguistic construction is also used to call attention to elements of grammar, showing an interest beyond poetics. An example of this occurs when Not Sidney encounters a bully named Clyde. As the bully approaches Not Sidney, he "asked me at what I was staring, his precise words being 'What you starin' at, li'l motherfucker,' the 'li'l motherfucker' saving him from ending a sentence with a preposition" (Everett 17). It is obvious that a schoolyard bully would not modify their insults to conform to grammatical conventions, but in pointing to the syntax of the sentence, the comment is made all the more funny, and the narrator is depicted with a heightened awareness of the situation.

All of these moves show the author having fun playing with notions of narrative guidance. In the same way the characters of the text point of failures of guidance, the hyper-aware style of writing that Everett employs point to a breakdown in narrative authority. The linguistic construction of the book plays with these sorts of shortcomings.

However, it is important to conclude that regardless of the failures and shortcomings of language, it is a necessary tool. If one wants to write, they have to use language. Despite the many valid critiques one can put forth when it comes to narration and the depiction of the world

through writing, the project of language continues. No amount of criticism absolves a writer from the work that has to get done: that is to say, if one wants to write a story, they have to accept the problems and limitations of language and work around it best as possible.

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