How do Augustine and Dante Demonstrate the Conflict between Classical and Christian Texts?

Classical literature has retained great weight throughout modern history, as is evident in our Literature Humanities curriculum. Both Augustine and Dante were intimately familiar with Vergil’s *Aeneid*, and used this text to reconcile the transition from classical to Christian literature, from ancient to modern epochs. Accordingly, Augustine and Dante utilize Dido, one of Vergil’s most renowned characters, and the rapid and lustful love that led to her suicide upon her lover Aeneas’ departure, to illustrate the frivolous and insubstantial nature of secular love and to argue that the love of God is vastly superior in meaning and outcome. This explicates the lack of profundity of classical literature and culture. The reader’s familiarity with Vergil’s text allows Dido to transform into an exhibit of the kind of love that alienates one from God and His wishes. In equating Dido with *The Aeneid*, and in extension the classical world, Augustine and Dante explicate how one will only encounter a morally-uplifting experience reading Christian texts.

Classical literature is the literature primarily of ancient Greece and Rome. The plots entail adventure stories characterized by the hero’s journey, with possible moral implications but no direct authorial moral intention. There is an invocation of the muses and gods, but no true sense of faith or value system that transcends social mores. There was a pantheon of gods, representing all facets of the human experience and themselves possessing positive and negative traits. The belief system of the ancient writers was vastly different and in a sense more “humanistic” in that
human traits and drives were not necessarily treated as wrong, but rather facets of earthly life with gods depicting all of them. These texts are not only considered “classical” because of their location in time, but are also deemed “classic” because their subject matter has retained relevance throughout history through its use of universal themes of the human experience such as love, tragedy, and death. Contrastingly, Christian literature is a form of devotion designated for individuals to absorb for their individual edification and spiritual development. Once the canon of biblical texts began expanding, a fascination with or enjoyment of classical literature was considered blasphemous. “True” Christians would not give into the selfish desire to be entertained, and rather seek moral fulfilment in what they read. In rejecting the glorification of human sensory experiences as appropriate subject matter for literature, these later authors were also denying a life of the senses, the earthly existence in favor of living with the afterlife in mind, with glorifying God rather than the self. The distinctions between classical and Christian literature, as well as reconciling these distinctions are of the upmost importance to Augustine and Dante. All of these stories – whether Classical or Christian – are characterized by a character’s journey, spiritual or otherwise, their path and pursuit of happiness and peace. It is how those terms are defined, be it through the acquisition of kleos or spiritual contentment, that differs.

In paralleling his spiritual conversion to the tale of Dido’s suicide, Augustine provides a familiar narrative to contrast the perils and short-comings of Dido’s carnal love, characterized by lust and bodily desires, with the only true and lasting love, the love of God. Augustine explains, “The single desire that dominated [his] search for delight was simply to love and to be loved”, which parallels Dido’s sole desire to be loved by Aeneas (Augustine 24). Furthermore, Augustine describes the events that unfold in *The Aeneid* as reminding him of “[his] own wanderings” on his way to spiritual salvation (Augustine 15). His inclusion of Dido familiarizes
his reader with his current emotional state in a relatable way, while his subsequent reference to scripture legitimizes his spiritual conversion to his Christian readers. By creating this emotional parallel, Augustine accentuates the uncertainty he was experiencing when “dying by [his] alienation from [God]” (Augustine 15). Augustine was just as fixated on finite love and gratification as Dido was, as he was brought to “weep over the death of a Dido who took her own life from love” (Augustine 15). Dido, an individual stuck in the physical and mortal, brings tears to Augustine’s eyes, while he pays no heed to what may become of his spiritual being as the “miserable condition in that respect brought no tear to [his] eyes” (Augustine 15). Thus, this classical text traps Augustine in the present and mortal universe, constricting his spiritual capacity by confining him to the concerns of the flesh.

Contrastingly, Augustine experiences an uplifting and liberating sensation when reading scripture. Unlike his insubstantial emotionally-depressing encounter with Dido, reading scripture is “as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into [his] heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled” (Augustine 153). Classical literature reminds Augustine of “dying” and fleeting emotional mortal constructs; however, biblical literature offers “light” and reassurance. Christian literature expounds a sense of certainty and purposefulness that could not be offered in classical texts, because of their inherent intention to entertain with story, to create fiction in which the reader might escape their own mundane lives. Trapped in the classical world, Dido must suffer from human longings, while scripture allows Augustine to purge himself of his internal darkness and rise above human weaknesses. Augustine employs the traditionally non-biblical image of Dido to elucidate this inner change: from turmoil and uncertainty to certain faith.

Similarly, Dante constructs his *Comedia* to respond to Vergil’s pessimism, mirroring many of his most influential scenes to illustrate how the same tale is morally-superior when
depicted in biblical terms. Dante parallels the atmosphere of Aeneas’ departure from Dido (“the north wind” that subjected his crewmembers to “so vast a blaze”) to Dido’s current condition in the underworld (where souls are “battered by opposing winds”, in a “hellish hurricane, which never rests”) (Vergil 102-103; Dante 41-43). This circumstantial concurrence alerts the reader of Dante’s greater project, of undermining Vergil’s classical undertaking. For example, Dante chooses to keep Dido, the symbol established as the ancient world, silent in his text. As Dante and Vergil journey through the lustful circle of hell, Dido is not given the opportunity to speak and defend her actions on earth: “No sooner had the wind bent them toward us / than I urged on my voice: ‘O battered souls, / if One does not forbid it, speak with us.’…with / wings uplifted, still, to their sweet nest, / those spirits left the ranks where Dido suffers” (Dante 45). Dante wishes for the spirits in this circle to speak, but excludes Dido, leaving the classical world silent and suffering. This mirrors Dido’s powerlessness and inability to voice her opinion in *The Aeneid*, as she is left alone with no other option than to be consumed by her self-destructive tendencies. Vergil illustrates wind and silence in a secular environment, in a world void of a moral compass and a true value system. Dante places Dido in a moral space, with a Christian sense of justice and order, subverting and silencing the classical values. Whereas *The Aeneid* succeeds in introducing the world’s sorrows, injustices, and horrors, it lacks a sense of closure and finitude evident in the *Inferno*.

Dante utilizes Francesca and Paulo to epitomize the danger of reading frivolous non-Christian literature that Augustine expounds in what he considers to be an immoral emotional response to reading *The Aeneid*. Just as Augustine is “weep[ing] over the death of a Dido”, Francesca “weeps” as she recalls reading the frivolous love story that brought her to the circle of lust (Augustine 15; Dante 47). Francesca’s condition, similar to that of Dido and Augustine
before his spiritual awakening, is marked by “uncertainty” and “longing” (Dante 47). The text that envelops Francesca and Paulo was one “to pass the time away”, which mirrors Augustine’s analysis that these non-Christian texts are merely “empty fables,” “fabulous poems,” “false,” and “failing to do anything morally right” (Dante 47; Augustine 17, 16, 15, 15). Thus, Dante and Augustine reach the same comprehensive conclusion that classical texts, which reflect a secular value system, alienate one from God’s path and leave one questioning and lacking in meaning and purpose, while biblical texts bring “peace,” “confidence,” and a congruence between one’s actions and one’s “moral principles” (Augustine 153).

Through their inclusion and portrayal of Dido in their texts, Dante and Augustine illustrate the moral division between classical and biblical texts. The fundamental differences in philosophy of writers during “the classical” pre-Christian period with its pantheon of gods representing all facets of man’s experience and sensory capacities, as opposed to the much more dogmatic and narrow interpretation of the meaning of the human experience proffered by Christianity is epitomized by the moralizing tone of Dante and Augustine. According to these Christian writers, reading should be a morally-uplifting experience that brings one closer to God’s intentions, and if not, reading estranges one from God’s path and is a corrupting experience. Entertainment became a selfish act, signifying that one was not devoting all of one’s energy to God. As Christianity infiltrated every facet of life, a sense of morality settled on every potential and exercised act. Literature sought to prioritize a moral imperative before an artistic vision. Religion became morality, a constricting transition that forcibly separated the ancient from the modern world. From humanist to moralist, our mode of expression is forever changing. As values systems progress, our conceptions of and relationship with art evolve to reflect these changes.
Works Cited

