Depictions of the Underworld

The portrayal of the underworld in epic tales of ancient Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe reveals each culture's complex and divergent beliefs about the afterlife. The works of King, White, and Hall correspond with one another in that they each conclude that the Greeks viewed the underworld as a realm to which all humans descended after death, regardless of their actions during life. (Romans and many medieval Europeans, on the other hand, largely considered the afterlife a place divided according to a person's behavior in life.) The one exception for the Greeks, King notes, are heroes, who are awarded an intermediary position between mortals and gods, and get a pass from spending eternity in the depths of the underworld. While King gives a succinct, cursory description of this midpoint that the Greeks, and later the Romans, believed in, White writes extensively of the concept in his examination of Dante's The Divine Comedy. He notes that the notion of a halfway point—later to be tagged as purgatory—underwent expansion in medieval times because it was a central node in the Christian latticework of after-death possibilities.

Hall's research, in contrast with King's and White's, is more contemporary, and contains fewer biases in its analysis of pre-Christian concepts of faith and the afterlife. Hall explores the similarities between the hierarchy of the underworld in the Aeneid and in The Divine Comedy, stating, along with the other two sources, that Virgil's and Dante's images of hell were alike in that there was logic in the way dead souls were assigned transgression-appropriate punishments—for example, how greedy people were forced to push great weights (symbolizing the things they wished to hoard). Unlike King and White, however, Hall offers a significant amount of evidence indicating that Virgil and, later, Dante subjected these souls to torture and misery in various levels of the underworld as much to make a political point as to fall in line with the religious views of their respective societies.

1. King, White, and Hall each state that Greeks, Romans, and medieval Europeans shared the belief that all humans reached the underworld after death

2. King, White, and Hall each point out that heroes are exceptions among Greeks in terms of destiny and the underworld.

3. Of the three experts, White gives the most thorough description of the position of purgatory.

4. Of the work done by the three authors, White's research addresses the most modern notions of the afterlife.

5. King, White, and Hall agree that in the Aeneid and The Divine Comedy, logical methods are used to group people in the underworld.

6. White and King do not indicate, as Hall does, that Dante's and Virgil's motives for subjecting souls to torture in various levels of the underworld were political and religious.

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