

LST 526 – Visions of Hell
Paper #1
July 13, 2004

Topic 4: Compare and contrast concepts of hell, humanity, and heaven in Hieronymus Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" with that found in St. Augustine's "City of God" Book 21.

"1,000 Words" vs. 23,000

Though their "canvases" were quite different, St. Augustine and Bosch both portray a humanity damned to a struggle within itself. Unquestionably, the futility of that turmoil and the sinful nature of man are at the heart of both works. There is clear demonstration of human nature, temptation, evil, and consequence. But it is evident that the visual text and the book have very different audience sensitivities in mind. Bosch is making a large, sweeping, if undefined statement. St. Augustine, on the other hand, is communicating specifics to the converted or at least people likely to be curious about the consequences of an unchristian life.

The use of exclusively visual communications makes Bosch's work an emotional lever in awaking perceptions about life, the afterlife and judgment. St. Augustine, on the other hand, uses the literal advantage of words to great effect. Taken separately each has a powerful story to tell. Read concurrently they leave one to both shudder in morbid curiosity and to wonder what common motivations they shared.

Bosch's big picture. The key difference between these works is that although Bosch's text is wordless, it is actually a much larger story. Indeed, as possibly a representation of that within the sight of God, the artist may have been attempting to recreate the world from the beginning through the end. Not only is man and his downfall colorfully portrayed, the world of sky, vegetation, earth, animals, lust, and violence are also shown.

Andrea Fontana's narrative of the "Garden" makes strong progressive assignments of meaning to the human figures and activities that are portrayed. However, Fontana is forthright in pointing out that Bosch left no written impression or notes about his work; not even a name. In some ways, however, this frees the observer to read a wide

range of meaning into the human figures, monstrosities, depictions of suffering, lust, malfeasance and many unnatural occurrences. For my part, it is difficult to see what is clearly forbidden by the visual text of Bosch, except for the proximity of various human activities to indications of human discomfort or suffering.

Of course, “Bosch’s scenes could be seen underscoring the point that sin will lead to punishment and that the idyllic frolic of earthly delights will ultimately give way to the anguished torments of everlasting hell,” (Fontana, 1997). If this is indeed Bosch’s intended message, then he has common cause with St. Augustine. But Bosch’s text shows us very little of what might cause people to end up in those fires. What we have, rather, are mere indications of possible human transgression.

Even the middle panel, with its frolicking figures, joyous, lustful pursuits, and seeming harmony between man and nature could be seen as a mere prelude to the fire. But indications from the foreground of the third panel are that gaming, including dice, cards and backgammon might lead to ruin. In addition, there is depiction from the same third panel that certain music might have been out of favor with the church (or Bosch). The ill effects of drink or over-consumption also get attention in the most curious third panel.

One has to wonder further if Bosch’s statement is not simply a pro-con, up-down statement on humanity and its relationship with nature. There is a form of neutrality the left “Eden” panel, which shows harmony and human primacy in the middle. In the third panel, we could see everything as going haywire, with images associated with nature seeming to consume human kind—albeit a more wickedly portrayed one. From this perspective, it might be possible to conjecture that the fire portrayed in the right hand panel is of this earth, one of the representations of consequence that earthly humans face.

Seeing things St. Augustine’s way. St. Augustine is, on the other hand, much more focused. His effort is designed to define and illuminate what occupies just a portion of Bosch’s vision: Hell. And he does so by clearly articulating, defending and reinforcing his beliefs. His work not only makes the case for Hell and a perpetual but painfully enduring fire, he notes various levels of offense. His approach has the remarkable effect of laying out a conversation with the reader. When one begins to question or rationalize,

St. Augustine's text seems ready to volley back with chapters such as "Against those who are of opinion that the punishment neither of the devil nor of wicked men shall be eternal."

In discussing earthly life and the possibility of salvation, Augustine makes several points relating to the pursuit of earthly pleasure and their acceptability in the eyes of God. He notes that these are, in his eyes, "legitimate and allowed" but can lead to downfall in any man who does not have Christ as a foundation. Further, he says that the attainment of earthly pleasers or *afflictions* is a form of trial or test for the righteous man. "The Furnace proves the vessels of the potter and the trail of affliction righteous men," (St. Augustine, City of God, Book 21). Trial and affliction also appear readily in the text and in the imagery of the Garden of Earthly Delights. The authors, however, draw these universal themes differently.

Augustine's City is all about fire and its use for purgatorial purposes or everlasting hell. This stands in contrast to Bosch who shows limited fire (and not even clearly the fire of hell). Heaven is given little attention in Book 21, other than to serve as a counter to hell or home of God. Overall, St. Augustine's writing is a methodical articulation of his interpretations of his faith. Like all good rhetoricians, he amasses facts from a variety of sources and then unloads in superbly calculated volleys of ecumenical reason. This example demonstrates:

For perhaps even the death of the body is itself a part of this tribulation, for it results from the first transgression, so that the time which follows death takes its color in each case from the nature of the man's building. The persecutions, too, which have crowned the martyrs, and which Christians of all kinds suffer, try both buildings like a fire, consuming some, along with the builders themselves, if Christ is not found in them as their foundation, while others they consume without the builders, because Christ is found in them, and they are saved, though with loss; and other buildings still they do not consume, because such materials as abide forever are found in them. In the end of the world there shall be in the time of Antichrist tribulation such as has never before been. How many edifices there shall then be, of gold or of hay, built on the best foundation, Christ Jesus, which that fire shall prove, bringing joy to some, loss to others, but without destroying either sort, because of this stable foundation! (St. Augustine, City of God Book 21, chapter 26)

Though he uses no illustrations, St. Augustine's words create numerous images in the mind of the reader. His language relates to both the reader's sense of curiosity and

innate self-doubt. Finally, as the above passage makes clear, St. Augustine's God is a very active, intensely aware. This contrasts to the passive, removed God the Father figure shown on the front of the Bosch triptych and the aloof Jesus figure shown on the left hand panel.

Conversing across the centuries. It's difficult to ascertain or even divine meaning behind these works without attempting to put oneself into the audience. Certainly, this is easier in the case of St. Augustine. Though he lived nearly 1,100 years before Bosch, he can be made more real to us. He wrote volumes. His work was foundational for the church and its growth. And as Dr. Schoells points out (7/8/04), being a "lusty boy" gave him something of a focus when later pondering the notions of sin and hell. Further, the fact that Book 21 addresses a very specific area (The City Of The Devil and Eternal Punishment) is likely to result in an audience with very specific concerns and interests.

While there is no doubt that St. Augustine illuminates hell along with its inevitability and its consequences, the visual text of Bosch does not straightjacket the viewer into such a conclusion. Rather, Bosch created something that captivated attention and inspired awe by its portrayal. The large surreal landscape seemingly demonstrates all within the view or purview of God. Yet he leaves this audience with wonder at his intent. Was he making a heartfelt religious statement or trying to, like so many modern artists, attempting to thrill via the use of "shock value." Indeed, his latter day attention as a forerunner to Dali certainly is but one example of how Bosch is read. As Fontana points out, "In the absence of an author we are left to create our own author," (Fontana, 1997).

So, so where St. Augustine tells you his intent and then overwhelms you with his proofs, Bosch leaves centuries of observers and writers to wonder. Depending on how these images are interpreted, Garden of Earthly Delights could easily be a portrayal of the world before and after man as well as three phases of human existence: Eden, multiplication and apocalypse. Or it could be Eden, Heaven and Hell, all unfolding from the initial view of God shown in the front side. But in entirely different ways, Bosch could be making a searing attack on the church or merely chiding it through the kind of satire that Fontana mentions. It is also possible to envision that this was intended to parody the story of creation by seeing both fairly literal biblical representations in

combination with frightening and fantastic drawings of humanity and its damnation. Perhaps his work serves to illustrate that the Christian scriptures are essentially “manmade” and therefore suspect.

Of course, if any of these were intended by Bosch, they t St. Augustine might argue against the viewpoints fiercely. But in a number of other ways the two men might find more common causes than points of disagreement. As a learned man, Bosch could well have been informed by the ancient teachings of St. Augustine. After all, St. Augustine’s impact on the church continues to ripple even today, 1,600 years after his death. There is in both authors an obsession with the flesh and the union (holy and unholy) of the sexes. To some degree, both also interpret the most fundamental of biblical teachings. First and foremost though, they both depict humankind as a race that is ill-at-ease with its very nature.

Although St. Augustine might have been horrified at such liberty and the unvarnished depravity portrayed in Garden of Earthly Delights, he might certainly have seen a level of Hellishness sufficient to satisfy his retributive instincts. And given the Bishop of Hippo’s ability to masterfully reason and conjecture his way through an argument, I suspect that he might have been the one person most capable of narrating Bosch.