

The Fascination With Hell's Fury

ABC's 20/20 presents **Hell: Our Fear and Fascination**
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Do you believe in hell? If you do, you're not the only one.

This afterlife for so-called sinners has fascinated society since the dawn of time. The very thought of the place inspired Dante to write his "Inferno," giving us history's most detailed description of the underworld.



Since then, artists from Michelangelo to Marilyn Manson have shaped our opinion of the infernal abyss. Most religious teachings describe hell as the netherworld anyone might end up in who strays from the straight and narrow. That view seems to be changing in this age of logic and political correctness.

A decade ago, 56 percent of Americans polled said they believed in hell. After the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the number shot up to 71 percent (polls conducted by Harris and Gallup), then fell in recent years, but this pattern is not a new phenomenon. Man's definition of the abyss has shifted since the dawn of humanity. And through it all, it seems the more sinister hell

is made out to be, the more it is mocked and embraced. It is a surefire punch line on television and in movies, and it's used to market everything from comic books to chewing gum.

Hell's Lure

Hell can also be a seductive muse for all those fans of sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. One of them, a kid from an Ohio Christian school named Brian Warner is today better known as Marilyn Manson. For more than a decade, he has made millions with his dark music and artwork, thrilling fans and provoking conservatives.

Manson said, "I am gonna say that it would probably be a more comfortable place for me, because everyone I know would be there, and I wouldn't really be allowed to do anything in heaven that would be any fun."

The possibility of going to hell may be attractive to Manson, but in the past, many held on to hopes that their enemies would spend eternity in its fiery grip.

Satan's realm grew more vivid through the harsh Middle Ages. Miriam Van Scott, who wrote "The Encyclopedia of Hell," said that is because peasant masses embraced the idea of heavenly relief and divine payback.

Hell, she continued, "was especially popular in the time when the lord or the king or the emperor could steal your daughter. He could sell your family away. So they really liked the idea of, 'OK, at some point you're gonna pay.'"

The Road to Hell ...

In modern times, who exactly is destined for damnation? Singer and songwriter Kurt Cobain asked that question in his song "Lake of Fire," and later committed suicide. A new ad for Orbit gum imagines the rock star in heaven, but most religions would send someone who took his own life to hell.

But in this age of science, Van Scott said people are moving away from that idea. "Hell is a little too medieval for some. It's a little too extreme," she said. "There have been so many horrible humanitarian disasters on massive scales that it's very hard to imagine something worse."