Inferno

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF DANTE ALIGHIERI

Born around 1265 in the city of Florence, Dante Alighieri is now widely recognized as the greatest poet of Italian literature and, for his work in standardizing an Italian dialect, is often called the father of the Italian language. Dante grew up in Florence during a time of political unrest, with constant feuds between opposing political factions. It is unclear how wealthy his family was, but he was neither poor nor exceedingly noble. He had an arranged marriage with a woman of a noble background, Gemma di Manetto Donati, but he fell in love with a woman named Beatrice, who appears repeatedly in his poetry. Together with other educated men of Florence (including Brunetto Latini, who appears in *The Inferno*), Dante pioneered a literary movement based around the style known as *dolce stil nuovo* ("sweet new style"). As a result of backing a losing political faction, Dante was exiled from Florence for life and it is during this exile that he wrote *The Divine Comedy*. He is also known for writing *La Vita Nuova*, a work celebrating his love for Beatrice, and composed other minor works. Shortly after finishing *The Divine Comedy*, Dante died, still in exile from Florence, and was buried in the town of Ravenna.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In Dante's lifetime, Italy was not yet a unified nation, but rather an assortment of independent, feuding cities. Dante's native city, Florence, was the site of much social strife and political turmoil, especially between two groups: the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The Ghibellines supported the primary secular power of the Holy Roman Empire, while the Guelphs did not. The Guelph's had defeated the Ghibellines and exiled the Ghibellines from Florence about a little over a decade before Dante wrote The Divine Comedy. After the Guelph's had taken power, though, they soon split into factions: the Black Guelphs, who wanted to work with Pope Boniface VIII (whom Dante despised) to maintain power, and the White Guelphs, who preferred Florentine independence from Papal influence. Dante was a prominent member of the White Guelph's, but they lost the struggle and were themselves exiled from Florence, including Dante. Dante, in fact, wrote *The Divine Comedy* while in exile. Many parts of *The Divine Comedy* serve as a way for Dante to comment on and criticize his Florentine and Italian contemporaries, by placing prominent citizens in hell as characters in his poem, for example.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Dante himself places his epic poem in a tradition of works by great classical authors like Homer, Virgil, and Ovid. His poem incorporates and rewrites characters and motifs from these earlier works. *The Divine Comedy* is also indebted to many theological ideas from the writings of the Christian philosopher and priest St. Thomas Aquinas.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Divine Comedy* (*The Inferno* is the first of three sections of *The Divine Comedy*)
- **When Written:** Early 1300s (exact date unclear)
- **Where Written:** Italy
- **When Published:** Unclear, but at least by 1317
- **Literary Period:** The (late) middle ages
- **Genre:** Epic poem (written in an Italian rhyme scheme called *terza rima*)
- **Setting:** Hell
- **Climax:** While *The Inferno* is only the first third of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, one may locate a climax in Canto 34, when Dante sees Lucifer, the epitome of sin and evil, at the very core of hell, the final sinner he sees on his journey through hell.
- **Antagonist:** There is no single antagonist, but sin is, in a sense, the main thing Dante struggles against. All the characters that threaten to thwart or delay Dante and Virgil's journey, from individual sinners to monsters to Lucifer himself, can be seen as agents of sin.
- **Point of View:** Dante narrates the poem in the first-person, recalling his own journey.

EXTRA CREDIT

How Divine. Dante originally titled his epic masterpiece simply *La Commedia* (the comedy), meaning that, as opposed to a tragedy, it had a happy ending. However, the Italian poet Boccaccio admired it so much that he suggested adding the word *divina* to the title, giving the work the name it has been commonly known by now for centuries: *The Divine Comedy*.

The Number 3. The number three is very significant for the structure of Dante's poem: there are three sections (Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso), and each section has 33 Cantos (except Inferno, which has an extra, introductory canto to make 34), while the entire poem is written in three-line stanzas (in an Italian form called *terza rima*). The number three and its multiples can be found all throughout *The Inferno:* hell has nine circles, for example, while Lucifer has three heads.

PLOT SUMMARY

Midway through his life, Dante wakes up in a **dark**, unfamiliar forest. He attempts to climb up a mountain, but his path is blocked by a leopard, a lion, and a wolf. The spirit of the Roman poet Virgil appears to him and tells him that he must take another path out of the forest. Dante's beloved Beatrice, who is now deceased and in heaven, has sent Virgil to guide Dante on a **journey** through hell, so that he can ascend through purgatory to heaven.

Dante and Virgil enter hell and first see a group of suffering neutral souls who committed to neither evil nor good. They next come to the river Acheron and see Charon, an old man who ferries souls across the river into hell. Charon first refuses to transport Dante, because he is a living soul, but Virgil tells him that Dante's **journey** is sanctioned by God, so Charon relents.

In the first circle of hell, Dante sees souls who did not sin, but died either unbaptised or before the time of Jesus. Here, he sees many virtuous pagans, including famous figures of classical Greek and Roman history, philosophy, and literature. Virgil introduces Dante to other famous poets of antiquity—Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan—who welcome Dante into their esteemed literary company.

Virgil leads Dante on to the second circle of hell, which is **darker** and full of more suffering and screaming. Here they see Minos, the judge of the underworld, who dictates where in hell souls will be punished. Like Charon, he tries to stop Dante, since he is a living soul. Again, Virgil says that Dante's journey is divinely willed, and Minos lets him pass. Dante sees souls endlessly blown about by wind and storm, which he learns are the souls of those whose sin was lust. Dante points out several famous souls and Dante, moved with pity, asks if he can speak to a pair of souls. One of the souls, Francesca da Rimini, tells Dante her story. She had an affair with her husband's brother, Paolo Malatesta, and now the two of them are punished together here. Dante faints from pity at hearing Francesca's story.

When Dante awakens, he is in the third circle of hell, where Cerberus, a monstrous three-headed dog, mauls and bites sinners. Virgil throws handfuls of dirt into Cerberus' three mouths, subduing the creature so that he and Dante can walk past it. The soul of Ciacco (punished here for gluttony) recognizes Dante and speaks to him, foretelling political strife for Florence and begging Dante to speak of him back on earth.

At the entrance to the fourth circle of hell, Pluto stands in Dante and Virgil's way. Virgil shouts at Pluto, again saying that Dante's **journey** is willed by God, and Pluto falls to the ground. In the fourth circle, Dante sees spendthrifts and hoarders of money. In the marsh where the river Styx ends, Dante sees the wrathful, who are endlessly fighting each other madly.

Dante and Virgil come to a tower and are met by Phlegyas, who transports Dante and Virgil across the Styx. During the boat ride, Filippo Argenti grabs onto the boat and asks Dante what he, a living soul, is doing here. Virgil pushes Filippo back into the marshy waters. After crossing the Styx, Dante and Virgil come to the gate of Dis. A group of fallen angels shut the gate and refuse to let Virgil and Dante pass. The Furies appear and threaten to summon Medusa to turn Dante to stone. Virgil tells Dante to cover his eyes, but before Medusa appears an angel arrives. The angel rebukes the inhabitants of Dis trying to thwart Dante's **journey** and opens the gate by simply touching it with a wand. Dante and Virgil walk through the gate and see a field with burning tombs, within which heretics are punished. Dante speaks to one of these heretics, a fellow Florentine named Farinata. While talking to Farinata, Dante is interrupted by Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, who asks about his son, one of Dante's friends. Farinata explains to Dante that souls in hell can see the future, but not the present. Dante and Virgil reach a cliff overlooking the lower parts of hell. Virgil suggests they take a break to get accustomed to the stench of lower hell and takes this opportunity to explain the layout of the rest of hell to Dante.

Virgil leads Dante down to the seventh circle of hell, where their **path** is blocked by the half-bull, half-man creature known as the minotaur. Virgil insults the creature, who thrashes around madly, letting Dante and Virgil sneak past. Virgil points out the Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood in which those who committed violence against others are punished. Centaurs roam the banks of the river, making sure no souls get out. The centaurs find Dante and Virgil, and Virgil convinces the centaur Nessus to allow Dante to ride him across a shallow part of the Phlegethon.

Virgil and Dante then enter a **dark** forest where the harpies dwell. When Dante plucks a branch from a tree, it bleeds and cries out in pain. The tree turns out to be the spirit of Pier delle Vigne, who committed suicide. Pier explains that the souls of suicides come to this forest and grow into trees. The harpies then eat their leaves, causing them great pain. Suddenly, two men run by, being chased by hounds. One jumps into a bush to hide, but is found and eaten by the hounds. Dante then speaks with the bush, which turns out to be the soul of a formerly living man. The bush has been hurt by the running man and, telling Dante that he was a man from Florence, begs Dante to gather its scattered leaves. Dante does so, before moving on.

Dante follows Virgil to a desert with burning sands, where fire falls from the sky. Dante sees numerous sinners walking around the desert or lying in the burning sands, including a giant man named Capaneus, who scorned God. Virgil and Dante come to a river whose banks are safe from the burning sands and falling fire. Before they proceed, Virgil explains the source of hell's rivers: the trickling stream of tears falling from a giant man underneath Crete. As Dante walks along the river, he finds

Brunetto Latini, his old teacher, who predicts great fame for Dante and names several famous sinners around them. Latini asks Dante to remember his work, the *Thesaurus*, so that he may live on through it. After leaving Latini behind, Dante is stopped by three noble Florentines: Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Jacopo Rusticucci. They encourage Dante to seek fame, praise his speaking ability, and ask about the city of Florence. Dante and Virgil then come to where the river falls in a huge waterfall down to the eighth circle of hell. Virgil throws Dante's rope-belt over the waterfall and in response to the signal a huge monster flies up to where they are standing.

The winged monster is Geryon, whom Virgil talks to and gets to transport Dante and him down to the eighth circle. This circle of hell is divided into ten circular trenches surrounding a deep well. In the first trench, Dante recognizes Venedico Caccianemico, who admits to selling his sister away to a lustful nobleman, as well as the mythological hero Jason. In the second trench, Dante sees Alessio Interminei, a flatterer, and Virgil points out Thais, a courtesan who told her lovers that sex with them was a miracle. In the third trench, Dante sees Simonists, those who bought or sold sacred objects, church offices, or pardons. Among these is Pope Nicholas III, who angrily says that his successor to the papacy will soon him join him here. He also predicts that the next pope will be even more evil than the current one. The fourth trench holds sorcerers and seers. For attempting to see too far ahead, they now have their heads turned around, facing out over their backs, so that they can only see backwards (and must walk backwards, too). Dante weeps at this sight of bodily disfigurement, and Virgil criticizes him for crying at God's divine justice. Virgil points out Amphiaraus, Tiresias, and Manto, three famous seers from classical mythology.

In the fifth trench, a group of devils try to attack Virgil, but he speaks to them, telling them that he and Dante are on a **journey** ordained by God. The leader of this group of devils, Malacoda, sends a group of devils to guide Dante and Virgil to the next trench. While walking with Dante and Virgil, the devils hook a sinner up out of the pitch, who talks to Virgil and Dante, telling them he was from Navarre. He tells Dante that he will call forward seven Italians who are in the pitch, if he will get the devils to stop torturing him. While the devils argue about this possible deal, the sinner takes the opportunity to dive back into the pitch, evading the devils.

In the sixth trench, hypocrites walk around slowly, weighed down by gilded cloaks lined with heavy lead. Dante speaks with two friars here, who also point out Caiaphas, the man who came up with the idea to crucify Jesus and is now crucified on the ground. In the seventh trench, Dante sees serpents and lizards chasing after and stinging sinners. One man is struck by a snake and burns to ashes, but then the ashes immediately come together to form into the man again. This man identifies himself as Vanni Fucci, who robbed a church. Vanni curses God and runs off, with a snake curling around his throat. Dante sees four souls: three men and a six-legged worm. The worm clings to one of the men until they merge into one creature, which then slithers off. A lizard comes up and exchanges bodies with another of the men, and the third runs off to chase this lizard.

In the eighth trench, Dante sees many twinkling flames. Virgil tells him that under each flame is the soul of a sinner. Virgil shows Dante the twin flame of Ulysses and Diomedes and speaks to them for Dante. Ulysses tells them his story: after returning home from the Trojan War, he tried to sail to the ends of the earth, but God sent a whirlwind to wreck his ship and he drowned. Before Dante and Virgil leave this trench, they speak with Guido da Montefeltro, an Italian who is punished for giving the pope false counsel. The pope promised to absolve Guido's sins in advance of his committing them, but this did not work because Guido did not actually repent his sins, so he still ended up in hell. Dante sees sowers of discord in the ninth trench, who are literally split open by a devil wielding a sword. He talks with Mohammed and Pier da Medicina, who points out some other sinners. Dante sees Bertrand de Born, who is punished for convincing a king to kill his father by having his head cut off. He walks around holding his head in his hands. Dante looks around for his deceased relative Geri del Bello, but Virgil tells him Geri already passed by, looking angrily at Dante. Dante realizes that Geri is angry because no one in their family has avenged his violent death. Dante and Virgil continue on to the tenth trench.

The souls in the tenth trench are falsifiers and suffer from horrible diseases. Dante talks with two alchemists, Griffolino d'Arezzo and Capocchio. He sees two other souls running about rabid, which Griffolino identifies as Gianni Schicchi and Myrrha. Dante then talks with Adam, an Italian counterfeiter from Brescia who is grotesquely bloated and swollen. Adam points out two other sinners, Sinon and the wife of Potiphar, and then gets into a feud with Sinon. Dante is entertained by watching the two sinners fight, and Virgil scolds him for enjoying this vulgar entertainment.

Dante and Virgil continue their **journey** forward and Dante thinks he sees towers surrounding a well in the **dark** distance. As they get closer, though, Dante realizes they are giants, with the bottom halves of their bodies stuck into the ground. Virgil identifies some of the giants and then talks to Antaeus, a giant who is free to move around. Antaeus carries Virgil and Dante down the well that leads to the ninth circle of hell and deposits them there.

The lowest circle of hell is made up of the frozen lake Cocytus. Sinners are submerged in the ice, most with only their heads sticking out. Dante speaks to several souls before accidentally stepping on the head of Bocca degli Abati. Bocca refuses to tell Dante his name and Dante angrily grabs his hair, threatening to pull it out. Bocca still does not say his name, but another soul calls out to him, revealing his name. Dante recognizes Bocca as

a traitor to Florence and tells him that his name will live on in infamy.

Dante sees two souls frozen together with one eating the other's head. He speaks to the one eating the other's head, who says that he is Count Ugolino from Pisa and he is devouring the head of Archbishop Ruggieri. Ruggieri imprisoned Ugolino and his children in a tower where they starved to death. Dante sees two other sinners—Friar Alberigo and Branca d'Oria—whose souls came to hell even before they died. Dante then sees Lucifer, whose humongous body towers out of the ice. He has three mouths, and each one holds a sinner in its teeth. The center mouth holds Judas, while the other two devour Brutus and Cassius. Dante holds onto Virgil as they climb up Lucifer's body and out of hell. They reach an outcropping of rock and walk into a cavern where the river Lethe begins as a small stream. They climb out of a hole, onto the island where Mt. Purgatory is located. Finally outside of hell, Dante looks up and can once more see the **bright stars** in the sky.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Dante – Dante is the protagonist and narrator of *The Inferno*. He presents the poem as a true, autobiographical recollection of his miraculous journey. He is a good man who strays from the path of virtue, finding himself in the **dark** wood at the beginning of the poem. He is saved by his beloved Beatrice, who sends Virgil to guide him on his spectacular journey through hell. Dante is often terrified in hell and is moved by pity for the suffering sinners he sees there. However, he gradually learns from Virgil and becomes both more confident and less sympathetic toward those who have sinned against God. He is often interested in lingering to speak with sinners from Italy, particularly his native city of Florence. As the author of his own story, he wields the power to give both himself and others the immortality of fame through his work.

Virgil – Virgil was the greatest and most famous poet of ancient Rome, revered by Dante and other medieval readers. In Dante's poem, he is a noble, virtuous pagan who guides Dante through hell, often identifying famous sinners. He comforts Dante when he is frightened and chastises him when he shows too much pity for sinners or lingers too long in parts of hell. Virgil is a pious character admired by Dante, but since he is ultimately still pagan, he must dwell with the other good pagans in Limbo.

Charon – A figure taken from Greek mythology, Charon is the ferryman who transports dead souls across the river Acheron and into hell. At first, he refuses to ferry Dante across Acheron, because Dante is a living soul. But he agrees to help Dante when Virgil tells him that their journey is ordered by God's will.

Minos – Minos was a judge in the underworld in Greek mythology and has a similar role in Dante's poem. Upon entering hell, souls go to see Minos in the second circle of hell and confess their sins. Minos wraps his monstrous tail around him a certain number of times, and this corresponds to the numbered circle of hell that the soul must go to.

Francesca da Rimini – Dante encounters Francesca in the second circle of hell, where the lustful are punished. Francesca had an affair with her husband's brother, Paolo Malatesta. The two of them were innocently reading romantic stories and became swept up with romantic passion. As a result, the two are punished together in hell.

Minotaur – In Greek mythology, the minotaur is the monstrous offspring of a human woman (the queen of Crete) and a bull. The minotaur blocks Dante and Virgil's way in the seventh circle of hell, but thrashes around mindlessly after being spoken to by Virgil, so that the two poets can sneak past.

Harpies – More monsters of classical mythology, these foul creature have the bodies of birds (with fearsome talons) but the heads of women. They dwell in the forest of the suicides in the seventh circle of hell, where they feed upon the leaves of the trees that the souls of suicides have grown into.

Pier delle Vigne – While in the forest of the seventh circle of hell, Dante plucks a branch from a tree and is shocked when the tree cries out in pain. The tree is actually Pier delle Vigne, an advisor to Frederick II who killed himself when his reputation was ruined by false rumors.

Speaking Bush – The bush in which Jacomo hides, which cries out in pain at having its leaves torn off and scattered. The bush tells Dante that it was once a Florentine citizen who hanged himself. Moved by pity for a fellow Florentine, Dante gathers the bushes leaves together and returns them to the bush.

Malacoda – Malacoda is the leader of the devils who torture souls in the fifth trench of the eighth circle of hell. His band of devils try to attack Virgil, but he stops them by telling them that God has willed his and Dante's **journey**. He then sends a group of devils to escort Dante and Virgil to the next trench, though this is later revealed to be an attempt to lead Dante and Virgil astray.

Sinner from Navarre – While the group of devils escorts Dante and Virgil through the fifth trench of the eighth circle of hell, they pull this sinner out of the pool of boiling pitch and torture him. He tells Dante he will show him seven Italians who are there if the devils stop torturing him. While the devils argue angrily about this proposition, he jumps back into the pitch, escaping the devils.

Ulysses – One of the most important heroes of Greek mythology, Ulysses (or Odysseus) appears in Homer's *Iliad* and is the protagonist of Homer's *Odyssey*. During the Trojan War, he helped plan the Trojan horse and also stole a sacred relic from the city along with Diomedes, during a secret night raid. He is punished in the eighth trench of the eighth circle of hell

for his deception. He talks to Virgil and relates the story of his death: after sailing home from Troy (which, incidentally, the *Odyssey* narrates), he tried to sail to the ends of the earth, but went too far. God sank his ship with a whirlwind and drowned him.

Guido da Montefeltro – Dante speaks with Guido in the eighth trench of the eighth circle of hell. Guido gave false advice to the pope. The pope absolved Guido in advance of his sins, but he still ended up in hell because he did not actually repent his sins when he was supposedly absolved.

Nimrod – A giant whom Dante sees in the eighth circle of hell. Nimrod attempted to build the Tower of Babel, which would reach up to heaven. When God destroyed the tower, the one language spoken by all men on earth fractured into the many languages we have now. In hell, Nimrod is unable to speak intelligible words.

Lucifer – Also called Satan, Beelzebub, and occasionally even Dis, Lucifer was an angel who led a rebellion against God. God then created hell to imprison Lucifer and his fallen angels. Lucifer is even larger than the giants Dante sees in the eighth circle of hell, and is found in the ninth circle, where his three mouths devour Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Dante and Virgil climb up Lucifer's gargantuan body to exit hell.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Beatrice – Beatrice is a woman beloved by Dante. She is deceased and in heaven, and descends into hell to tell Virgil to guide Dante on his journey.

Neutral Souls – Dante sees these souls as he enters hell. They remained neutral in not committing to good or evil and now continually chase after a blank banner.

Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan – These four great poets of ancient Greece and Rome dwell in Limbo, in the first circle of hell, because (like Virgil) they were good pagans. Together with Virgil, they welcome Dante into their group of esteemed poets, inducting him into a lofty literary tradition.

Paolo Malatesta – Paolo is Francesca da Rimini's lover, who is punished along with her in the second circle of hell. Franceca tells their entire story to Dante, and Paolo does not speak a word.

Cerberus – A creature taken from Greek mythology, Cerberus is a terrifying three-headed dog. It mauls souls in the third circle of hell and stands threateningly in Dante's way. Virgil, though, subdues the monster by throwing handfuls of dirt into its mouths.

Ciacco – A Florentine citizen who recognizes Dante in the third circle of hell, where he is punished for gluttony.

Pluto – Pluto is the Roman god of the underworld, also associated with wealth. Dante finds him at the entrance to the fourth circle of hell (where spendthrifts and hoarders of money are punished). He blocks Dante's path, but Virgil's words cause him to drop to the ground harmlessly.

Phlegyas – Phlegyas ferries Dante and Virgil across the river Styx.

Filippo Argenti – A wrathful sinner who accosts Dante while he is crossing the Styx. He latches onto Phlegyas' boat, but Virgil shoves him back into the Styx's waters, where he bites himself and fights with other wrathful souls.

Furies – In Greek mythology, the Furies are three monstrous female figures—Allecto, Tisiphone, and Megaera—who punish perpetrators of certain heinous crimes. They come to Dante and Virgil while they are stopped at the gate of Dis and summon Medusa to come turn Dante to stone.

Medusa – Another character from Greek mythology, Medusa's gaze has the power to turn onlookers to stone. The Furies call for her at the gate of Dis to turn Dante to stone, but an angel arrives before she comes.

Angel – When Dante and Virgil are stopped at the gate of Dis, the angel comes to open the gate and stop the Furies and fallen angels from preventing Dante's journey, all by simply touching the gate and speaking.

Farinata – A citizen of Florence who, as a heretic, is punished in the sixth circle of hell inside a burning tomb. He explains to Dante that souls can foretell the future, but are unable to see the present clearly.

Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti – The father of one of Dante's friends who is in the sixth circle of hell, he asks Dante about his son. From Dante's response, he assumes that his son has died, but as Dante leaves he tells Farinata to tell Cavalcante that his son is still alive.

Nessus – A centaur (half-horse, half-man) who demands that Dante identify himself and his punishment in hell in the seventh circle of hell. After being spoken to by Virgil, Nessus helps Dante cross the boiling Phlegethon river.

Chiron – Another centaur (and the tutor of the hero Achilles), whom Dante encounters at the banks of the Phlegethon.

Lano and Jacomo – Two men who run, fleeing from hounds in the forest of suicides. Jacomo jumps into a bush, scattering its leaves all over, in an attempt to hide, but is found and torn apart by the hounds.

Capaneus – Taken from Greek mythology, Capaneus is a giant man who Dante sees lying in the burning desert of the seventh circle of hell. Capaneus scorned God and still tries to defy him in hell.

Brunetto Latini – Dante's former teacher, whom he encounters in the seventh circle of hell among the Sodomites. Latini asks Dante to remember his literary work, the *Thesaurus*, in the hopes that he can live on through his work.

Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Jacopo Rusticucci –

Three famous Florentine citizens who speak with Dante in the seventh circle of hell. They ask about Florence and Jacopo encourages Dante to seek immortality through fame.

Geryon – A huge, winged monster, whom Virgil gets to carry Dante and him from the seventh to the eighth circle of hell. In Greek mythology, one of Hercules' twelve labors was to steal Geryon's cattle.

Venedico Caccianemico – A man from Bologna whom Dante recognizes in the first trench of the eighth circle of hell. Venedico is being punished for selling his sister like a prostitute to a nobleman.

Jason – A famous hero of Greek mythology, who went on a quest to find the golden fleece. Dante sees him in the first trench of the eighth circle of hell, where he is punished for deceiving women.

Alessio Interminei – An Italian whom Dante sees in the second trench of the eighth circle of hell. He is being punished for being a flatterer.

Thais – Virgil points out this courtesan to Dante in the eighth circle's second trench. She is punished alongside other flatterers for comparing sex with her lovers to miracles.

Pope Nicholas III – Dante encounters Pope Nicholas in the third trench of the eighth circle of hell, where he is punished for Simony by having his head stuck in a hole. He says that his successor, Pope Boniface, will soon join him there, and predicts that Boniface's successor will be evil.

Amphiaraus, Tiresias, and Manto – Three famous seers from classical mythology. For attempting to see too far ahead in the future, they are punished (in the fourth trench of hell's eighth circle) by having their heads turned around so they can only see backwards.

Catalano and Loderingo – Two friars punished among the hypocrites in the sixth trench of the eighth circle of hell, where they are weighed down by bright gilded cloaks whose insides are lined with heavy lead.

Caiaphas – Caiaphas instigated the crucifixion of Jesus and is punished in the eighth circle's sixth trench by being crucified on the ground, where other souls walk on top of him.

Vanni Fucci – Dante sees Vanni in the seventh trench of the eighth circle of hell. Vanni is struck by a serpent and burns to ashes. His ashes, though, are immediately reconstituted into his body. Dante talks with Vanni, but then Vanni curses God, which disgusts Dante.

Cacus – A mythological monster who supposedly dwelled on the ancient site of Rome before the city was founded and was killed by Hercules. Dante sees him chasing after a centaur in the seventh trench of the eighth circle of hell.

Cianfa, Agnello, Buoso, and Puccio Sciancato – Dante encounters these four souls in the seventh trench of the eighth circle of hell. Cianfa is in the form of a six-legged worm that latches onto Agnello until they merge into one creature. A lizard stings Buoso and exchanges bodies with him.

Diomedes – A hero of the Trojan War, Diomedes accompanied Ulysses on a night raid into the city of Troy during which they stole a sacred religious object from the city. He is punished for his deception in the eighth circle's eighth trench, where he and Ulysses share a double flame.

Mohammed – Dante includes the prophet of Islam in the eighth circle of hell's ninth trench, as someone who caused discord, insofar as he split Abrahamic religions by introducing Islam.

Pier da Medicina – Dante sees Pier among the sowers of discord in the eighth circle of hell. Pier asks Dante to remember his name on earth.

Curio – Pier da Medicina points out Curio to Dante in the ninth trench of the eighth circle of hell. Curio caused civil strife in ancient Rome, instigating the civil war between Caesar and Pompey.

Mosca – Pier da Medicina also shows Dante Mosca, who spread civil discord throughout Tuscany.

Bertrand de Born – Dante sees Bertrand de Born among the sowers of discord. For convincing a king to kill his father, Bertrand is decapitated and walks around holding his severed head in his hands.

Geri del Bello – Dante looks for his relative, Geri del Bello, in the ninth trench of the eighth circle of hell. Although he doesn't see him, Virgil tells him that Geri saw Dante and looked angry, probably (reasons Dante) because his death has gone unavenged on earth.

Griffolino d'Arezzo – An alchemist from Siena who is punished with a horrible disease in the tenth trench of the eighth circle of hell.

Capocchio – Another alchemist punished in the eighth circle's tenth trench.

Gianni Schicchi – A soul punished in the tenth trench of hell's eighth circle. He runs around, rabid, and Dante sees him bite Griffolino d'Arezzo.

Myrrha – Like Gianni Schicchi, Myrrha runs rabid around the eighth circle's tenth trench. She is a character from a Greek mythology famous for her incestuous desire for her father.

Adam of Brescia – Also in the tenth trench is Adam, a counterfeiter who is punished with a disease that makes his stomach grotesquely bloated. He gets into a dispute with Sinon.

Sinon – In classical myth, Sinon was a Greek who tricked the Trojans into welcoming the Trojan horse into their city. He is punished in the eighth circle of hell, in the tenth trench, and he gets into a feud with Adam of Brescia.

Wife of Potiphar – In the Bible, this unnamed woman betrays

Joseph. Dante sees her in the tenth trench of the eighth circle of hell.

Ephialtes – A giant from classical mythology who attempted to overthrow Jupiter. Dante sees him in the eighth circle of hell.

Antaeus – Another giant from classical mythology, whom Hercules defeated in a wrestling match. Virgil persuades him to carry Dante and him safely down from the eighth circle of hell to the ninth.

Judas – Judas was one of the twelve apostles but ultimately betrayed Jesus. As one of the worst sinners in hell, he is devoured by one of the mouths of Lucifer at the very core of hell.

Napoleone and Alessandro of Mangona – Two brothers who killed each other and are punished in the ninth circle of hell.

Camicion dei Pazzi – A man who killed a family member and is punished in the ninth circle of hell, where he talks with Dante.

Bocca degli Abati – A traitor of Florence who is in the ninth circle of hell. He refuses to tell Dante his name, but Dante learns it from another soul and angrily tells him that his name will live on in infamy for his sin.

Count Ugolino – An Italian count who was imprisoned along with his children in a tower by Archbishop Ruggieri where they starved to death. In the ninth circle of hell, he is frozen next to Ruggieri, whose head he devours.

Archbishop Ruggieri – Ruggieri imprisoned Count Ugolino and his children, causing them to die of starvation. He is punished in the ninth circle of hell, where Ugolino continually eats away at his head.

Friar Alberigo – After killing his own brother at a banquet, Alberigo is punished in the ninth circle of hell. His tears freeze over his eyes and he asks Dante to remove the ice in return for telling him his name. Dante agrees but then refuses to remove the ice.

Branca d'Oria – A soul punished in the ninth circle of hell even before his death for murdering his father-in-law. His living body is possessed by a demon on earth.

Brutus and Cassius – Brutus and Cassius betrayed Julius Caesar, leading to his assassination. They are devoured by two of Lucifer's mouths at the center of hell.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

SIN, JUSTICE, PITY AND PIETY

As it narrates a journey through hell, Dante's *Inferno* is essentially a tour of all kinds of different punishments for different sins. It is filled with spectacular, unbelievable, and grotesque punishments, but these punishments are not meant merely to deter others from sinning. Dante's poem aims to show that such punishment is a complement to sin, completing or "perfecting" it. Thus, all of the punishments in Dante's vision of hell are always fitting, corresponding in some way to the specific sin a person committed. The wrathful, for example, spend eternity fighting each other angrily, while sowers of discord, who split communities with social strife are, in hell, physically split open by a devil wielding a sword. Many of the punishments might seem to modern readers like arbitrary, cruel acts of violence, but from the perspective of Dante's God they are fitting completions for the sufferers' sins. As the inscription above the entrance to hell says, God was moved by justice to create hell, and all of the suffering within—meticulously organized and meted out in different areas of the underworld— is part of his divine plan of cosmic justice.

Nonetheless, even though Dante's poem presents the punishments of hell as deserved, Dante himself cannot help but feel great pity for many of the souls trapped there. After talking to Francesca in the second circle of hell, he faints from being overcome by pity. And he is continually moved to pity by the suffering souls who tell Dante their stories, such as Cavalcante or Pier delle Vigne. In the eighth circle of hell, Dante cries after seeing the bodily disfigurement of various sorcerers and seers. This irritates Virgil, who asks him, "Who's wickeder than one / That's agonized by God's high equity?" (20.30) Dante gradually learns from his master Virgil and over the course of the poem tends to feel less and less pity for the sinners he meets. When Count Ugolino tells him his story, for example, the count tells Dante that he must be cruel not to shed any tears, but Dante does not pity him. (He does, however, pity Ugolino's children who died innocently with him.) In some cases, Dante even expresses righteous anger at sinners, as when he threatens to tear Bocca degli Abati's hair from his scalp or when he tells Friar Alberigo that he will wipe the frozen tears from his face but then refuses to. To modern readers, these scenes might make Dante seem cruel, but this is part of Dante's progression toward heaven, as he gradually learns to see the punishments of hell as deserved and part of a divine plan of justice. From this perspective, shedding piteous tears over guilty sinners is an affront to God. As Virgil tells Dante in Canto 20, in this context one must choose between pity and piety. By the end of the *Inferno*, Dante makes his choice clear.

PAGANISM VS. CHRISTIANITY

Dante's epic poem is obviously a deeply Christian work. One might be surprised, then, to find that it is filled with allusions to pagan mythology and is populated not just by biblical figures, but also by characters of Greek and Roman myth and history. Perhaps the most important character after Dante is, after all, a pagan: Virgil. But despite how strange this might seem to us, this is actually a common occurrence in the middle ages (and later in the Renaissance), where authors had to find ways of fitting the classical heritage they revered and studied into their Christian culture. Dante accomplishes this masterfully in the *Inferno*, and one of the most notable features of his work is this incorporation of classical, pagan motifs into a thoroughly Christian framework. He does this in several ways.

First, while many classical figures are present in the poem, they are only present in hell. Thus, while acknowledging the presence of mythological creatures like the centaurs, Dante relegates them to an ungodly place. Moreover, he sometimes turns mythological figures who are not entirely monstrous into full-blown monsters. Minos, for example, is simply a judge in the underworld in Greek mythology. He retains this role in Dante's hell, but becomes a horrid monster with a frightening tail. Dante also includes some classical heroes in his hell, including Ulysses (Odysseus), whom he rewrites into a sinful over-reacher who tries to sail to the ends of the earth after he successfully returns home (Homer's *Odyssey* shows Odysseus efforts to get home from the Trojan War). By rewriting figures from classical mythology, Dante is able to include them in his epic scope while subsuming them within his Christian system.

Another challenge for Dante involving figures of classical antiquity is posed by the great poets of ancient Greece and Rome whom Dante admired, as well as other great men of ancient history. Dante has these souls dwell in the first circle of hell, punished only by being excluded from heaven proper. This allows Dante to venerate these great men (such as Homer, Socrates, Plato, and Cicero) without compromising his rigid Christian ideas about salvation. Virgil is the most striking example of this. Virgil was a pagan who lived before the time of Jesus. However, he was widely acknowledged in the middle ages as the best poet of ancient Rome and there was also a popular idea that one of his poems actually predicted the birth of Jesus. Thus, Virgil is able to attain a kind of special status: while relegated with other good pagans to the first circle of hell, he is the one chosen to guide Dante on his holy journey. But in the end, after guiding Dante through hell, he will not be able to guide him to heaven, because he cannot enter there. Dante's epic is rife with tensions between the pagan influences Dante admires and Christian ideas he values, but in the end Christianity trumps everything else.

INDIVIDUAL FAME

Dante repeatedly stresses the importance of fame throughout his epic poem. Souls often ask Dante to remember their names and to speak of them on earth, and several times Dante promises to do this in return for information. Probably the most repeated scene in the poem is that of naming or identifying. Virgil and Dante are often asked to name themselves, and they themselves continually point out, identify, and ask about individual sinners. Some of these are already famous, including mythological heroes like Jason, but many are simply Florentine or Italian citizens, whose names live on through Dante's words. The idea of fame is so important in the poem because it offers a kind of immortality, a small compensation for the eternity of suffering sinners face in hell. Even after their deaths, people can live on, in some sense, through their famous reputations. Brunetto Latini, for example, asks Dante to mention his great work, the *Thesaurus*, because he lives on through it. However, fame is not always a positive thing. By naming individual sinners, Dante gives them everlasting fame, but this also means placing them in hell. They may live on forever in Dante's poem, but they do so as wicked sinners. Bocca degli Abati seems to recognize this in Canto 32. He does not want to live on in infamy, so he refuses to tell Dante his name (though Dante learns it anyway from another spirit).

Dante guarantees not only the fame of the various sinners named in his poem, but also his own fame by writing the *Inferno*. By telling his own story, he is able to cement his fame both as a literary character and as a masterful poet and storyteller. One way he does this is by surpassing other great poets. In the first circle of hell, Dante joins the great poets of ancient Greece and Rome, and over the course of his own epic poem he outdoes these models. He replaces the heroic journeys of Homer's Odysseus and Virgil's Aeneas with the ultimate journey through the afterlife, and specifically says in Canto 25 that he is describing things even more amazing than Ovid or Lucan (two famous Roman poets) ever described. Dante's epic poem is, in a sense, in constant competition with the great epics of classical antiquity. By including the authors and characters of these works in his own epic poem, he subsumes and surpasses them, guaranteeing his own immortal fame as a great poet. After all, we are still speaking of Dante and reading his words now, hundreds of years after his death.

THIS WORLD VS. THE AFTERLIFE

Throughout the *Inferno*, there is a tension between the earthly world we inhabit while living and the next world we inhabit in the afterlife. Dante is remarkable to so many spirits of the underworld because he is able to transgress this boundary and journey through hell as a living, earthly soul. Dante is in the unique position of being able to go to hell and back, and can therefore communicate things

about the underworld to an earthly audience. Dante constantly remarks how the things he sees in hell are more amazing, frightening, and horrid than anything one could ever possibly see on earth. Thus, he stresses the profound difference between hell and earth. And yet, in a sense, the entire point of Dante's poem is to show the close relationship between these two worlds: what one does on earth affects how one spends eternity in the next life. And this is not simply a matter of being good or bad, and then going to heaven or hell. The very particular way in which someone sins influences the very particular way someone is punished in a specific part of hell. Moreover, in Dante's geography, hell is deep underground, under the surface of earth. Hell and earth are therefore part of the same whole. Dante's repeated use of similes highlights this tension between similarity and difference between earth and hell. All of his similes comparing aspects of hell to earth rely on there being a likeness or similarity between parts of the two worlds. And yet, most of the similes operate in order to show how hell is unlike anything on earth, how things in hell are larger, more horrible, or more terrifying than their earthly counterparts.

The sinners that Dante encounters in hell are all there because, in essence, they cared more about this world than the next. They prioritized riches, power, and other earthly things above eternal salvation and did not weigh their sins against the consequences they would cause in the afterlife. Even in hell, many souls seem oddly preoccupied with earthly matters, talking with Dante about local Italian politics, asking about their hometowns, and prophesying the future of Florence. At times, Dante himself seems more interested in such local, earthly concerns than in learning about the afterlife. When he was writing *The Divine Comedy*, Dante had recently been exiled from Florence, and many episodes in the *Inferno* comment on the political strife of Dante's native city. He thus often uses his cosmic poem to make very specific points about his earthly life. Readers of Dante's *Inferno* must, like Dante's characters, balance a concern for both earthly and other-worldly issues in the poem.

LANGUAGE

Words and language have an almost magical power in the *Inferno*. Dante's words often stir souls to speak and share their stories, while Virgil's words move demons and other obstacles out of their way, as they journey through hell. At the gate to the city of Dis, the angel that opens the gate does so merely by speaking. And finally, Dante's entire journey is able to happen because it is divinely ordained by the word of God. This association of God with the mystical power of the word of God draws on the beginning of the book of John, in the New Testament, which starts, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This power of the word of God trickles down, so to speak, to his various agents, such as the angel and Virgil, who help carry out God's will.

Aside from this kind of holy language, words are also important for spirits suffering in hell, because the ability to speak means the ability to name oneself and thus attain fame in Dante's narrative. The punishments of hell cause pain in many ways, but almost always hurt sinners additionally by robbing them of language itself, reducing their voices to inarticulate screams and cries of pain. Those who, in the midst of their pain, can still talk to Dante are at least able to gain some kind of fame and remembrance in Dante's poem. Dante, in turn, is able to grant such sinners' a bit of fame precisely because of his skill with language as a poet. His use of the written word is what guarantees the fame of these sinners and of Dante himself.

However, Dante also shows the limits of language. He often worries that he cannot express in words what he saw in hell, that his poem is not adequate to represent the fantastical sights of hell, and that readers will not believe what he writes. The limits of Dante's language can be seen in his prolific use of long similes. In these similes, he can only express what he sees in hell in terms of what his readers have seen on earth. At a more fundamental level, Dante must also try to express the sights of hell in a language that only has words for things on earth. Dante's very language inevitably reduces what it describes to earthly terms. But we should not let Dante's posturing of humility deceive us: he is still immensely confident in his ability as a poet. Despite the limitations of language, Dante uses his talent as a poet to create a stirring, vivid portrait of hell. Ultimately, while there are limits to what language can do, exceptional people like Dante and Virgil (to say nothing of God himself) can use words to extraordinary ends.

LOVE

Love may not be quite as powerful as the word in the *Inferno*, but it is still a strong force in Dante's epic. Dante is allowed to make his amazing journey through hell because of how much Beatrice, Dante's beloved who is now in heaven, loves him. She left heaven because of her love for Dante, to tell Virgil to guide Dante through hell. And as Dante traverses through hell, he is continually motivated to continue his frightening journey by some form of love, whether for Beatrice, Virgil, or God. In addition, the inscription above the entrance to hell specifies that hell was created by God, whom it describes as "the power, and the unsearchably / high wisdom, and the primal love supernal," (3.5-6). God's original love is thus in large part the primal organizing force behind hell and the entire plot of Dante's poem.

While Dante champions these forms of sacred love, his poem also provides examples of various perversions of love. A love of wealth and power, for example, drives many souls to commit terrible sins. The second circle of hell contains those sinners who gave into excessive lust, including the memorable

Francesca da Rimini. These sinners follow lust and desire, rather than chaste love like that between Dante and Beatrice. Dante also includes Sodomites in his vision of hell, a category including (but not limited to) those who engage in homosexual acts. Also in Dante's hell is Myrrha, a figure of Greek mythology famous for her incestuous desire for her father. And while Myrrha loved her father excessively and in the wrong way, hell is also filled with those who did not love their own families or nations enough, as the traitors in the ninth circle attest.

Many of the sinners in Dante's hell thus pursued some kind of bad love or desire instead of the one love that, for Dante, matters most: the love of God. By contrast, Dante's love for Beatrice is virtuous, because it leads him closer to God's love, rather than further away from it.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE JOURNEY

Dante's poem is heavily allegorical, which means that there are countless individual, minor symbols throughout the text that stand for larger ideas. However, one major symbol that recurs throughout the poem is the idea of the journey. The first line of the poem compares Dante's life to a road or path which Dante is halfway through. Thus, when Dante strays from the right path in the beginning of Canto 1, he has symbolically strayed from the right kind of life. His journey with Virgil through hell is both a physical journey toward heaven and a more allegorical journey of spiritual progress toward God and away from sin. Throughout hell, Dante often lingers to talk to souls or is delayed because of his pity and fear. When Virgil repeatedly encourages him to stay on the course of their journey, he is also, in a sense, telling Dante not to stray from virtuousness. Similarly, the various impediments that threaten to halt Dante's journey are not just physical barriers, but can be seen as agents of hell that threaten to keep Dante from a pious life. Dante's purposeful journey toward the destination of heaven can be contrasted with the aimless wandering and back-and-forth movement of many damned souls in hell. They have completely lost the path of righteousness and literally have no direction in the afterlife. Dante, by contrast, has the ultimate goal of heaven, which gives a purpose and direction to his wandering.

LIGHT AND DARK

Another pervasive symbol throughout *The Inferno* is the binary of light and dark. Hell is, of course, associated with darkness. Dante often remarks on the darkness of hell and how some areas of hell are completely devoid of light. God and heaven, on the other hand, are associated with light. (There is some light in hell, but it is generally not the result of God's brightness, but rather of burning fires that cause pain and suffering.) The first thing that Dante notices when he finally exits hell is the sight of the stars in the sky, which he could not see underground, symbolizing that he has returned from the dark world of sin. But beyond its associations with evil, darkness can also represent a kind of uncertainty, since one cannot see clearly in the dark. In the eighth circle of hell, for example, Dante first thinks the giants are towers, because his sight is impaired by the darkness. Thus, when the poem opens in a dark forest, this does not necessarily mean that Dante is in a place of sin (though it may also carry this association), but especially means that Dante is in an uncertain, unknown place. He is in a state of mental confusion matched by his inability to see clearly in the forest. He tries to climb the mountain in the beginning of the poem because he sees the light of the sun shining over it, promising some kind of knowledge or clarity. However, as Virgil informs him, he must come to the light through a more difficult path, one full of darkness.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Divine Comedy 1: Hell* published in 1950.

Canto 1 Quotes

Midway this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1-3

Explanation and Analysis

These are the opening lines of the Inferno. They describe how the speaker, Dante, is personally and spiritually lost—and in need of aid to right himself again.

This beginning is a classic example of a story "in medias res," or that which commences mid-action without any preface. Instead of outlining the scene or his personal history, Dante places his reader immediately in the moment. Indeed, the

phrasing highlights suddenness with the opening word "Midway" and the opening image "I woke"—both of which point to a rapid shift. Thus the text stumbles into its own first events without any orientation—much as the speaker Dante has lost "the right road" and has no clear route forward. The *Inferno* places reader and speaker in analogous situations of being lost.

It is worth digging into the specific way in which the speaker Dante has become lost. He casts it, first, as a crisis that has hit at a specific moment—"midway" in his life, which implies that his experience in the Inferno will seek to address this personal plight. The image of the "dark wood" takes the idea of being internally lost and makes it an external experience, while the "right road" can indicate both a geographical disorientation and also an ethical or spiritual uncertainty. Thus the opening lines of the *Inferno* establish a key theme in this work: an external geography and journey will be used as an allegory for an internal one. As Dante travels through the different circles of hell, he will address these corresponding moral and personal uncertainties.

> Canst thou be Virgil? Thou that fount of splendour
> Whence poured so wide a stream of lordly speech?

Related Characters: Dante (speaker), Virgil

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.79-80

Explanation and Analysis

After being thwarted by several animals, Dante glimpses the shade of Virgil, who will become his guide. Dante then goes on to praise Virgil for his poetic prowess.

This interaction is the first of many in which Dante will seek to recognize a historical figure he encounters in the *Inferno*. Phrasing his greeting as a question—"Canst thou be Virgil?"—implies a certain surprise and indicates that the identifications will not always be automatic. Dante then clarifies his surprise by recalling the reason for Virgil's fame. He uses the metaphor of a fountain spurting water to relate to Virgil's creation of language. So as a renowned Roman poet, he is a "fount of splendour" for his ability to produce excellent verse—which is deemed a "stream of lordly speech." The water imagery highlights the bountiful and rejuvenating quality of Virgil's verse and foreshadows how Dante will be guided by it along the various bodies of water in the Divine Comedy.

That Dante (the writer) has selected Virgil to be his guide is highly significant. Beyond conveying his personal preference for Virgil's poetry, Dante has made the daring choice of selecting a pagan guide through a Christian landscape. He could well have chosen the figure to be Jesus or another Christian figure, but instead he selects a famed Roman poet. Such a choice reveals the relative importance of classical art even within the confines of a Christian society and poem. Dante has positioned his own work within a famed classical lineage, demonstrating that the text may be theological in nature but that it draws on a Greek and Roman heritage.

> For the Emperor of that high Imperium
> Wills not that I, once rebel to His crown,
> Into that city of His should lead men home.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.124-126

Explanation and Analysis

Virgil lays out the route that Dante will take, first through Hell and then ascending toward Heaven. He notes that another spirit will have to play the role of the guide later, because Virgil is not permitted in heaven.

Dante cleverly introduces the pagan backstory of his guide Virgil with the reference to "once rebel to His crown." As a result, God—deemed "Emperor of that high Imperium"—has demanded that he not be allowed to enter heaven. This pronouncement fits with the general tenants of Christianity, which would relegate non-believers to Hell. (And, according to the Christianity of Dante's time, all people born before Christ's resurrection--like Virgil--must automatically go to Hell as well.) Despite having evidently renounced his earlier credences and come to adopt some form of Christianity, Virgil is still barred from "that city of His": heaven. As a result, he will only play the role of the guide in the Inferno and most of Purgatory, after which Dante must be brought "home" by someone else.

This passage sets the limits in how prominent of a role figures like Virgil could play in Dante's work. As pagans, they could never have access to any realm beyond Hell—but Dante was able to humanize them and give them important roles within those confines. His text can thus be seen as a complicated negotiation between affirming the merits of classical artists and philosophers and confirming the

rightness of his own Christian dogma.

In some interpretations, Virgil is also seen to represent reason and human talent, which, in the allegory of the poem, can only take one so far. At some point, even one with the reason and skill of Virgil must take a leap of faith and hand his life over to God (or, in the poem, to God's representative Beatrice, who leads Dante to Heaven itself).

Beatrice am I, who thy good speed beseech;
Love that first moved me from the blissful place
Whither I'd fain return, now moves my speech.

Related Characters: Beatrice (speaker), Beatrice

Related Themes:

Page Number: 2.70-72

Explanation and Analysis

Virgil recounts the story of how he was led to Dante, during which he came into contact with the divine inspiration for the tale: Beatrice. Beatrice explained to Virgil how her love for Dante motivated her to leave heaven and speak with this intermediary.

This passage establishes a chain reaction of affection toward Dante that has saved him from his personal and spiritual crisis. Virgil may be his direct guide, but their relationship is actually ordained through Beatrice, herself an emissary of the Virgin Mary and God. Her line "Love that first moved me" may pass over the reader, but it should not be taken lightly. Beatrice has chosen personal affection as her central motivation—as opposed to a moral or strictly religious justification. The Divine Comedy is thus, in an odd way, a love story between Dante and Beatrice—in which she plays the role of both muse and distant guide for the speaker-protagonist.

Her lines here also help clarify the way the three different divine planes will operate. Although Virgil cannot ascend into heaven because he is pagan, Beatrice can evidently move between the realms. Yet at the same time, she desires not to do so, saying "the blissful place/ Whither I'd fain return," implies that she feels a natural gravitational pull toward heaven. Thus while blessed beings may indeed move between the realms, the text demonstrates that they have a natural desire to remain in heaven—which only underlines the extent of her love for Dante, as she left heaven for his sake.

Canto 3 Quotes

Justice moved my great maker; God eternal
Wrought me: the power, and the unsearchably
High wisdom, and the primal love supernal.

Related Characters: Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Jacopo Rusticucci (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4-6

Explanation and Analysis

These words are the inscription on the gates of hell. They glorify God for the wise and just way he crafted the doorway.

Throughout the Divine Comedy, Dante continually reasserts God's omnipresence—constantly showing how he has positively affected each component of the mystical universe. The gates proclaim first how he was moved by "justice," indicating that the division of hell, purgatory, and heaven stems from firm moral systems that give each person his or her correct end. Next, they allude to the "power" and "high wisdom," thus combining the values of strength and intelligence that would allow God to have an idea and will it into existence.

Although these are expected qualities to attribute to God, the gates also significantly append the phrase "primal love." This focus on love recalls how Beatrice is motivated to aid Dante, just as Dante is primarily inspired by his love for her in return. That the doors speak first of justice but then transition into love speaks to how this quality undergirds much of the spiritual and narrative meaning in the Inferno. Dante has crafted a unique worldview and religious schema in which love for and from God is placed at the center of the text—despite the seeming disconnect between love and the often cruel, excessive punishments of Hell.

Canto 4 Quotes

They sinned not; yet their merit lacked its chiefest
Fulfillment, lacking baptism, which is
The gateway to the faith which thou believest;

Or, living before Christendom, their knees
Paid not aright those tributes that belong
To God; and I myself am one of these.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker), Homer, Horace, Ovid,

and Lucan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.34-39

Explanation and Analysis

Dante has now entered the first circle of Hell: Limbo. Virgil explains to him that those present in Limbo have not actually sinned, but since they were never baptized, they cannot ascend to heaven.

This passage develops the complex theme of how to contend with classical artists and philosophers whose works and lives are admirable. For being technically pagan, they cannot be sanctified in a dogmatic religious work like Dante's. Virgil affirms "their merit"—which refers to their various artistic accomplishments—yet saying that their merit "lacked its chiefest fulfillment, lacking baptism" implies that their works would never reach their complete potential due to their spiritual flaws. Dante thus subtly canonizes these figures, while also leaving them sufficiently defective to appeal to a Christian audience.

Virgil clarifies, too, that this fate befalls both those who live during Christianity but were never baptized, as well as those who predated "Christendom." Thus Limbo becomes a place for people who could not have reasonably ever been baptized or believed in the "proper" religion—who failed to do so through no personal fault of their own, but rather because their era did not allow them to do so (whether because they lived before Christ, or died as babies, or, presumably, lived in countries where Christianity did not yet exist). In acknowledging that he himself fits into this category, Virgil further clarifies why he may play Dante's guide here but can ultimately never enter heaven. That the text's guide is himself morally implicated here serves to generate sympathy for those who reside in Limbo—a technique that will be used in many of the ensuing circles.

> And greater honour yet they [Homer, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan] did me—yea,
> Into their fellowship they deigned invite
> And make me sixth among such minds as they.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker), Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.100-102

Explanation and Analysis

In Limbo, Dante meets a number of important classical artistic figures. He describes, here, how these five ancient poets welcomed him into their fold.

Despite the earlier renunciations of these poets for being pagan, Dante here speaks in admiring, almost worshipful terms. He considers recognition to be "greater honour" and calls them "such minds," which emphasizes their intellectual accomplishments as opposed to their religious flaws. Using the somewhat pretentious language of "fellowship" and "deigned invite," Dante stresses the deep significance of their welcome, and so elevates himself to their level. Indeed, to be accepted into the arms of these five poets would place Dante at the pinnacle of classical Western culture.

Yet as his text is written in Italian, as opposed to Greek or Latin, and since it conforms to the necessities of Christian doctrine, his work would actually be of a far greater cultural significance to his time and place. Furthermore, Dante will be able to leave behind the Inferno, unlike these poets, and progress to Heaven. By placing his speaker-character in the company of these figures, Dante the poet has also written himself into their company on a symbolic level. The *Inferno* thus establishes itself, within its very pages, as a classic that would be "sixth" in the set of other canonical works.

> Nay, but I tell not all that I saw then;
> The long theme drives me hard, and everywhere
> The wondrous truth outstrips my staggering pen.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.145-147

Explanation and Analysis

Dante continues to pass through Limbo, recounting the scores of luminaries he finds there. Here he notes that it would be impossible to make reference in the work to every single person he spotted.

This passage presents the poet in an artificially humble fashion. His text, represented by the "staggering pen," is supposedly incapable of fully rendering the "wondrous truth" of the reality he experiences. That is to say, his art cannot measure up to the complexity and nuance of the world, and therefore he must "tell not all." A comment such as this one plays several roles in the text. First, it generates sympathy for the speaker and makes the audience accepting

of any aesthetic flaws in what he has created; second, it makes a broader philosophical comment on the impossibility of any "pen" to fully capture the complexity of reality, and particularly the reality of spiritual and supernatural realms; third, and most subtly, it shows the importance of Dante's "long theme."

Any artist or poet takes such a theme to organize the direction of their work. For Dante, the theme is the ascendence to spiritual salvation. To pursue this theme with a singular purpose, he must refrain from distractions and becoming too deeply lost in the characters of Limbo. Thus Dante must carve a specific direction for his work from the vast potential available to him—a choice made by any artist, but here one that takes a specific religious "long theme."

Canto 5 Quotes

Love, that so soon takes hold in the gentle breast,
Took this lad with the lovely body they tore
From me; the way of it leaves me still distrest.

Love, that to no loved heart remits love's score,
Took me with such great joy of him, that see!
It holds me yet and never shall leave me more.

Love to a single death brought him and me.

Related Characters: Francesca da Rimini (speaker), Paolo Malatesta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5.100-106

Explanation and Analysis

Now in the second circle of hell, Dante listens to the tale of Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta. Francesca explains that love bound the couple together, but also caused them to sin.

This passage develops and complicates the theme of love seen in Dante's relationships with Beatrice and with God. Whereas up to this point "love" has been identified as the motivating factor for Dante's quest for salvation—and even the main foundation for all divine action—here it becomes a negative force. Francesca shows how this transition may occur subtly, for it first "takes hold in the gentle breast," employing a calming tone and appealing image. The "gentle breast" becomes the "lovely body," yet instead of offering a nurturing environment for love, it is instead taken hold of and crippled by the same force. The following lines play with the images of taking and holding to corroborate this dual nature of love: Though love may take away from others, it is also bound intensely to Francesca. It is something that severs people precisely in the act of keeping them close.

When Francesca adds, "Love to a single death brought him and me," she portrays simultaneously the benefits and detriments of this emotion. For while it may have brought them the "death" confined to Hell, the emphasis of the sentence falls on the modifier "single"—thus stressing less their fate and more the way that they were bound together in it. Thus Dante is careful to avoid any stark judgement—positive or negative—on the behavior of these lovers. Though the poem may place them in contrast with the more spiritual love of Beatrice or God, it also generates a certain pathos for these sinning characters. Their actions, the text affirms, are reasonable and even have a certain poetic beauty (hence their lasting fame among Dante's many characters).

Canto 9 Quotes

So we stirred
Our footsteps citywards, with hearts reposed,
Safely protected by the heavenly word.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9.103-105

Explanation and Analysis

When Dante and Virgil first arrive in Dis, they are distraught at the resistance they meet from the Furies and other diabolical forces. After an angel clears the way, however, they proceed more confidently.

That Dante and Virgil stay "safely protected by the heavenly word" corroborates that their quest is sanctioned by God. More specifically, it shows that the heavens are taking an active stake in their journey as it proceeds, continuing to protect and to aid the travelers. The emphasis on "heavenly word" accents how this protection stems from language—God's word and the angel's word (which cleared the way to Dis), just as Dante has exalted his own poetic verse and Virgil harnesses speech to move various obstacles aside.

The scene at Dis also shows the innovative way Dante generates dramatic tension and suspense. This is a

somewhat difficult task, for he must affirm God's omnipotence, while also leaving sufficient textual obstacles to create a compelling narrative. As a solution, Dante will often describe events like this one at the gates of Dis: an evil creature surfaces who will be eventually dispelled by God, but first it is able to instill sufficient terror in Dante and Virgil to generate an emotional response. Thus Dante is able to maintain both his loyalty to religious doctrine and his commitment to crafting a well-wrought, suspenseful tale.

Canto 11 Quotes

Of all malicious wrong that earns Heaven's hate
The end is injury; all such ends are won
Either by force or fraud. Both perpetrate

Evil to others; but since man alone
Is capable of fraud, God hates that worst;
The fraudulent lie lowest, then, and groan

Deepest. Of these three circles, all the first
Holds violent men; but as threefold may be
Their victims, in three rings they are dispersed.

[...] the second circle opens to receive

Hypocrites, flatterers, dealers in sorcery,
Panders and cheats, and all such filthy stuff,
With theft, and simony and barratry.

[...] in the smallest circle, that dark spot,
Core of the universe and throne of Dis,
The traitors lie.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11.22-66

Explanation and Analysis

While Dante and Virgil are becoming accustomed to the smell of the lower circles of Hell, Virgil explains its geography. He delineates the different regions inhabited by traitors, liars, and perpetrators of violence.

This passage portrays how minutely structured Hell is in the Divine Comedy. In other religious representations, it is often presented as a undifferentiated space in which sinners of all types mingle. Yet here Hell is rigorously categorized: each person is slotted into the area appropriate for their sin, and each punishment is meted our accordingly. Though Virgil outlines some universal features—"the end is injury" in all cases—he explains that God finds some sins more despicable than others. That he "hates that worst" of fraud shows, again, how hate and love underlie God's various judgments. The rigid structure of hell thus derives not from any artificial plan but rather from the emotional associations formed by God.

The specific order that Virgil outlines here is worth considering: though some contemporary readers might find violence to be the most disreputable and thus most punishable act, Dante locates "traitors" at the deepest level of hell. Those who are fraudulent or have lied in various ways are also deemed worse than those who have committed violent acts. Thus the text establishes a moral framework that does not emphasize the external horror of an act, but rather finds more fault with internal actions of treachery and deceit: these do not simply deny love, but actually pervert it to horrifying ends.

Canto 15 Quotes

Keep handy my Thesaurus, where I yet
Live on; I ask no more.

Related Characters: Brunetto Latini (speaker), Dante

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15.119-120

Explanation and Analysis

Here Dante speaks to the shade of his teacher Brunetto Latini. As their conversation finishes, Latini asks Dante to recall and continue to use his book: the Thesaurus.

Latini repeats and develops the pattern of characters asking Dante to honor their memory outside of Hell. This repeated theme indicates that the characters in Hell maintain a vested interest in the Earth even after their demise—and that, more specifically, they want to protect their reputation and memory beyond their death.

That Latini wishes this to take place through his Thesaurus offers a slightly different spin on the theme. Whereas other characters have requested that Dante speak of them as people, Latini focuses on the written work he has produced. There he can "yet live on": he will continue to exist through its pages—existing, in fact, beyond the confines of Hell. Dante establishes, then, the way that inscribed language grants a version of immortality to its writer. And, of course, this is precisely what the Divine Comedy is permitting Dante to do: crafting his own "thesaurus" of the divine

spheres that will allow him to persist beyond death, and even beyond his own personhood.

> So may thy soul these many years abide
> Housed in thy body, and the after-light
> Of fame shine long behind thee.

Related Characters: Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Jacopo Rusticucci (speaker), Dante

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16.64-66

Explanation and Analysis

Dante speaks to three Florentine noblemen, who give him advice on how to act when he returns to earth. They encourage him, particularly, to seek fame so that he will be more immortal than a common man.

The exchange reveals the fraught relationship that Dante as both poet and speaker has to the idea of fame. If one were to take Jacopo's comments at face value, one might believe that "the after-light of fame" is an essential end for Dante to pursue. That is to say, that while he should try to "abide" in the world for an extended period of time, more important is seeking a fortune and renown that persist "long behind" him. Similar recommendations have been offered by other characters, and they repeatedly request that Dante aid their fame in shining beyond the confines of Hell.

Yet one must also note that these recommendations come from Florentines who have been condemned to Hell. Though Dante may treat them with interest and respect, the fact that they have sinned should cause their advice to be received skeptically. Too much pride and ruthless seeking of fame is, indeed, staunchly opposed to the universal love and humility so repeatedly lauded by this poem. Thus while Dante's characters often place value on immortality through fame—and the Divine Comedy itself could be seen as the fulfillment of that project—the work also implies that egoistically searching for immortality will be self-defeating in the end.

> Because he tried to see too far ahead,
> He now looks backward and goes retrograde.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker), Amphiaraus, Tiresias, and Manto

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20.38-39

Explanation and Analysis

In the fourth trench of the eighth circle, Virgil and Dante encounter the Greek oracle Amphiaraus. Virgil explains how his punishment was given to correspond to the exact nature of his scene: trying to see too far into the future.

This moment is a classic example of the "contrapasso" logic that undergirds much of the *Inferno*. "Contrapasso" is a Latin term for "suffer the opposite," and Dante repeatedly portrays sinners to be experiencing inversions of what they did to spite God on earth. Here, Amphiaraus' sin was to "see too far ahead," or to prophesy beyond his appropriate role as a mortal. And therefore, he must suffer the opposite: see "backward" and "retrograde." Contrapasso often takes, as it does here, a metaphorical sin and makes its inversion literal: for Amphiaraus, the abstract idea of seeing forward is made literal in that he physically looks backward. The importance of these scenes is to show how rigidly structured Hell is—that is to say how minutely and perfectly God has planned it out. In this way, Dante shows its composition to be inherently just, while also insulating himself from critiques that something would be flawed in his conception of the Inferno.

Canto 24 Quotes

> Put off this sloth [...]
> Sitting on feather-pillows, lying reclined
> Beneath the blanket is no way to fame—
>
> Fame, without which man's life wastes out of mind,
> Leaving on earth no more memorial
> Than foam in water or smoke upon the wind.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker), Dante

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24.46-51

Explanation and Analysis

Dante and Virgil climb an arduous set of rocks, which winds the speaker. Virgil scolds him in response and reminds him of the dangers of laziness.

Virgil returns to the complicated theme of fame in the Divine Comedy, here linking it to the value of active work. He likens the physical "sloth" of Dante in the moment to the

broader sins of sloth: this would be practiced by those who would simply be "sitting on feather-pillows" instead of pursuing any true end. Though Virgil could have finished his reproach by noting how sloth is a sin in the eyes of God, he instead links it to notoriety, pointing out that "fame" will require active effort on Dante's part.

Thus Virgil further valorizes the importance of being famous on earth after one's death, because it will grant a type of immortality. With the metaphor of "foam in water or smoke upon the wind," Virgil summons two poetic images of ephemerality—to which he juxtaposes the potential sturdy immortality granted by "fame." Dante thus presents his journey through hell and the corresponding task of writing the Divine Comedy to be intensely arduous, but also to be his way to leave a "memorial" upon the earth that will outlast his life (while, at the same time, condemning the excessive desire for earthly fame).

Canto 26 Quotes

Florence, rejoice, because thy soaring fame
Beats its broad wings across both land and sea,
And all the deep of Hell rings with thy name!

Five of thy noble townsmen did I see
Among the thieves; which makes me blush anew,
And mighty little honour it does to thee.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26.1-6

Explanation and Analysis

After meeting a number of shades that hail from Florence, Dante gives this ironic set of comments on his city. He simultaneously glorifies Florence and disparages it for producing these agents of sin.

Dante plays on a traditional way of exalting cities: by recounting their fame and how they have emissaries spread throughout the world. Thus he notes the "soaring fame" of the city whose metaphorical "wings," or broad presence, are a fixture in "both land and sea." Yet by adding the detail "all the deep of Hell rings with thy name," Dante makes this praise ironic—turning their fame into infamy. For a presence in Hell would speak to a fame due to sinning. This condemnation becomes more explicit when he hones in on the specific characters—"five of thy noble townsmen"—he encountered. He says explicitly that they brought "mighty little honour" to their city. This passage differentiates, then, between different forms of fame that a city or a person may experience. Dante shows that one may indeed remain significant beyond one's death, but that "little honour" is accrued if the reason for that fame is having sinned.

Tormented there [...] Ulysses goes
With Diomede, for as they ran one course,
Sharing their wrath, they share the avenging throes.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker), Ulysses, Diomedes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26.55-57

Explanation and Analysis

Virgil informs Dante about the fates of two souls hiding beneath a split-flame. Ulysses and Diomede, he explains, are being punished for having stolen the palladium of Troy.

As he did in Limbo, Dante here incorporates classical figures and references into his own work. Instead of denying the importance of pagan figures in a Christian worldview, he finds a way to include them within the poem's religious and artistic framework. This strategy is particularly effective when applied to the characters of Ulysses and Diomede, who are featured in the two most important classical Greek epics: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Both texts feature the underworld as a prominent location, but it functions radically differently from Dante's. In Homer's works, Ulysses is treated as a hero both above and below ground. Thus Dante has actually rewritten Homer's narrative, which was in fact praised many Cantos before in Limbo. In this way, Dante is able to set his text in conversation with classical figures, but also rise above them by claiming the moral high ground of his Christian associations.

Canto 28 Quotes

Who, though with words unshackled from the rhymes,
Could yet tell full the tale of wounds and blood
Now shown me, let him try ten thousand times?

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28.1-3

Explanation and Analysis

As he enters the ninth circle of Hell, Dante observes once more how his work will be unable to convey the full extent of the horror he sees. He then challenges anyone else to attempt that feat.

This statement presents Dante as simultaneously humble and proud: he notes that he is unable to "tell full the tale" he sees, while also contending that no other would be able to do so. His tone, however, has grown more assertive from the earlier mentions that his pen would never properly describe the journey. Through his adventure, it seems, Dante's aesthetic confidence has grown and he now believes that while his text may not be perfect, it is indeed a masterpiece.

Attention is drawn, in particular, to the poetic artifice of the text: Dante explicitly notes the "rhymes" that metaphorically shackle him, for he writes within a strict form of meter and rhyme. Thus he cannot necessarily select the easiest language to convey his experience, but must rely on words that function within the form. These constraints are evidence of Dante's struggle against the sin of sloth, and he claims that even without them no other poet would be able to match the work. Thus Dante accents his adherence to form, and claims that other artists with less meticulous compositions will never outmatch his descriptive powers.

Canto 31 Quotes

The self-same tongue that first had wounded me,
Bringing the scarlet blood to both my cheeks,
Thus to my sore applied the remedy.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31.1-3

Explanation and Analysis

Dante reflects on the benefits and detriments of his linguistic talent. He observes that poetry is not inherently a praiseworthy end, but that it can be so in service of God.

Opting for the metaphor of spoken language, he uses the image of “self-same tongue” and then differentiates between its positive and negative effects. Language “wounded” Dante spiritually because it was sacrilegious, but it also could serve as the “remedy” to that same issue if it is properly used. Dante moves toward resolving his earlier experience of being lost in life’s path, indicating that redemption comes from being able to differentiate between these two types of language.

Dante is also intervening, here, on a complicated religious debate on the meaning of art, and the role it should play in conjunction with the Church. As we have seen throughout the *Inferno*, art is often associated with pagans and heretics—yet Dante is also evidently drawn to the creative prowess of the classics. Here, he seeks to resolve that tension by explicitly casting language as both capable of harm and healing. Thus Dante defines a uniquely religious type of classic, fusing the Christian and classical traditions together within his own piece.

That's Nimrod, by whose fault the gracious bands
Of common speech throughout the world were loosed.

We'll waste no words, but leave him where he stands,
For all speech is to him as is to all
That jargon of his which no one understands.

Related Characters: Virgil (speaker), Nimrod

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31.77-81

Explanation and Analysis

When Virgil and Dante encounter the figure of Nimrod, Virgil offers this poignant commentary on the nature of communication. He observes that their language will be incomprehensible to Nimrod, just as his language is incomprehensible to them.

To Nimrod, Virgil attributes the origin “of common speech,” which is deemed a perversion compared to the singular language of God. Nimrod was responsible for this because he built the tower of Babel, which fractured the one language of humanity into many (according to the Old Testament story). That, as a result,he would be unable to understand Dante and Virgil implies that their language is fundamentally different and ordained by God. Furthermore, Virgil sets a high value on the importance of their language, for they should “waste no words” when they need not to. The implication is that Dante’s language—as it appears in the poem itself—is highly valuable and should only be passed to those who deserve to hear it.

The question of common versus holy speech is particularly significant in Dante’s work. Dante wrote the Divine Comedy in Italian instead of the traditional Latin, which was otherwise seen as a holy language. Thus when Virgil says

that they are indeed speaking a language that evades "jargon" and that comes from God, as opposed to Nimrod, he is inherently saying that Dante's Italian is on equal footing with Latin.

Canto 32 Quotes

As 'tis, I tremble lest the telling mar
The tale; for, truly, to describe the great

Fundament of the world is very far
From being a task for idle wits at play,
[...]

But may those heavenly ladies aid my lay
That helped Amphion wall high Thebes with stone,
Lest from the truth my wandering verses stray.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32.5-12

Explanation and Analysis

As is characteristic by now, Dante opens Canto 32 by observing how difficult it is for him to recount his journey. He asks the muses to assist him in conveying the events that will transpire.

The precise anxiety that Dante holds to his artwork has shifted here. Before, he was primarily worried about including a sufficient quantity of information—always reflecting on the number of people and sights that he failed to include. Here, on the other hand, he is concerned with accuracy. Saying, "lest the telling mar the tale" differentiates between the actual content ("tale") and the form ("telling") through which that content is conveyed to the audience. Dante worries that his particular tale has great stakes being "the great fundament of the world" and that therefore "idle wits" may be likely to incorrectly convey the information. He thus sets the stakes of his endeavor and also shows how any who are indeed able to convey the "tale" would be quite impressive for having done so.

That Dante seeks help in this endeavor from the muses (ancient Greek goddesses) is quite provocative. He cites an example of their prowess in classical mythology: helping "Amphion wall high Thebes with stone," yet one must recall that this action and its tale were pre-Christian, and thus heretical to the Church. The muses, after all, belonged to the Greek and Roman pantheons, and it was traditional in the Greek classics, such as Homer's, for the speaker to ask the muses for aid is conveying his tale. Once more, Dante straddles a complicated line between affirming his Christian roots and incorporating classical figures and traditions. That he believes the muses will allow his verses to center on "truth" reveals a firm commitment that the two worlds can bridged to great spiritual and aesthetic benefit.

Canto 34 Quotes

How cold I grew, how faint with fearfulness,
Ask me not, Reader; I shall not waste breath
Telling what words are powerless to express.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34.22-24

Explanation and Analysis

When Dante penetrates the final recesses of Hell, he grows increasingly frightful and reserved. He claims that he cannot describe certain horrors that he experiences.

Despite Virgil's earlier cautions that Dante should be brave and face his anxieties, he seems to have regressed here, being "faint with fearfulness." Instead of just having an emotional reaction to the experience, however, Dante observes how this feeling affects his ability to craft art. Evidently, there is a direct connection between the horror experienced and Dante's ability or willingness to represent it in language. He implies, perhaps, that recounting terrors is a painful process—or that the negativity is carried forth in the artwork itself.

As with many of Dante's similar asides, we must remain skeptical of his actual inability to describe certain things. Throughout the text, already, we have seen a clear ability to present the various terrors of Hell. Indeed, this has been his task: to represent, without pity or empathy, what he sees to warn potential sinners on earth and to internalize these values himself. This passage thus shows how despite Dante's progress toward this end, he maintains the human flaws of fear and reticence.

Each mouth devoured a sinner clenched within,
Frayed by the fangs like flax beneath a brake;
Three at a time he tortured them for sin.

Related Characters: Dante (speaker), Lucifer, Judas, Brutus and Cassius

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34.55-57

Explanation and Analysis

Dante here describes the horrifying body of Lucifer himself, as he holds and punishes Judas, Brutus, and Cassius for the worst sin of all: betrayal of one's master.

This final image confirms and centers the moral system that Dante has been recounting thus far, in which traitors are considered to be the most appalling of criminals. Notably, he includes both religious and classical figures: though Judus may suffer the worst fate for having betrayed Jesus, Brutus and Cassius both make an appearance for betraying the secular figure of Julius Caesar. By placing these three characters at the bottom rank of hell, Dante sets the stakes of the most despicable action—from which one can recover the full hierarchy of lesser sins up to Limbo.

That Dante has chosen there to be "three" sinners punished by Lucifer is no coincidence. Recall that the Divine Comedy is structured in three sections and composed of triplet verses—all of which serves to reiterate the importance of the Holy Trinity to his world system. Here, we see a corrupted version, in which the three greatest sinners have been unified into a single body through being consumed by Lucifer. (Just as the Holy Trinity combines three disparate beings into a single identity.) This symbolic association shows how the logic of God pervades every single component of Dante's world, and how Hell and evil is essentially not its own entity, but only a perversion of what God has made. Even at the furthest depths of Hell, the structure is analogous to that of the height of Heaven.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CANTO 1

Midway through the course of his life, Dante wakes up in a **dark** forest, having lost his way from the right **road**. He does not know how he strayed from the road or how he arrived in the woods, but he says that he will record his story.

Having strayed from the right, virtuous path of life, Dante finds himself in a dark landscape of ambiguity, confusion, and possible sin. He narrates his own story both for the reader's benefit and for his own everlasting fame. It is unclear to what degree this forest is a real, earthly place or a more allegorical, spiritual landscape.

Dante sees a mountain with the **sun** shining above it. The sight comforts him, and he attempts to climb the mountain. But as he begins his climb, a leopard leaps in front of him, forcing him to turn back. Dante is still hopeful that he can climb the mountain, encouraged by the bright rays of the sun. But then a terrifying lion comes into his path, followed by a fierce wolf.

Dante attempts to find an easy path to the goodness and clarity suggested by the shining sun. However, his way is blocked by three fierce animals, which represent sin. (The three animals can potentially be seen as standing in for the three kinds of sin: lack of self-control, violence, and fraudulence or deception.)

Dante is frightened by the animals and loses all hope of scaling the mountain. He reluctantly returns to the dark forest, where he sees some kind of figure. He calls out to it, unsure if it is a man or a ghost. The figure identifies himself as the shade of Virgil, the greatest poet of ancient Rome. Dante is awe-struck and impressed, calling Virgil his master.

Despite Virgil's paganism (i.e. the fact that he is non-Christian, having lived before Christ), Dante reveres him as a good man and an important poetic model, admirable both for his virtuous life and for his skill with words.

Dante tells Virgil about how he was turned back from ascending the mountain by wild beasts, and Virgil informs him that he must take a different **path**. He says that the wolf prevents anyone from passing, and will continue to do so until a greyhound comes and drives her away, hunting her back to hell.

Virgil quickly assumes the role of Dante's spiritual and literal guide. The greyhound represents the coming of Jesus on Judgment Day to drive away the forces of sin.

Virgil says he will guide Dante on his **journey**. He says Dante will go through a terrible place with souls in torment, after which "a worthier spirit" (1.121) will lead him on the rest of his journey toward heaven, since God will not allow Virgil, a pagan, to enter heaven. Dante agrees to follow Virgil on this journey.

In spite of Virgil's admirable character, he is still a pagan and cannot guide Dante past hell, where he is confined. In order to reach the light of heaven, Dante must journey through the darkness of hell, where he will see the consequences of sinning. Dante's journey will take him from our world to that of the afterlife.

CANTO 2

It is now **evening**, as Dante begins his **journey**. As narrator, Dante invokes the muses and the personification of memory to help him recall his journey. Dante worries that he is not strong enough for the journey before him. He says that Aeneas went to the underworld and Paul went to heaven, but he is not a hero like Aeneas or a holy apostle like Paul. Dante does not think he is fit for the difficult journey.

As a time ambiguously between the light of day and the dark of night, evening suggests that Dante is still poised between the possibilities of sin and piety. Invoking the muses for help is a classical, pagan idea that Dante still uses for his Christian epic. He needs their help if he is to relate, in words, his miraculous journey. Dante worries that he is not a famous hero, but by telling his story he will achieve his own form of heroic fame.

Virgil chides Dante, telling him his anxieties arise from mere cowardice, which constantly "lays ambushes for men," (2.46). He tells Dante that while he (Virgil) was in Limbo, a lady from heaven came to him and told him to help a friend of hers find his way to heaven. The lady was Beatrice, who has left heaven momentarily on account of her deep love for Dante.

Beatrice's love for Dante is the motivating force behind his entire journey. Dante's love for her leads him to God's love, the force behind not just his life, but the entire universe.

Virgil immediately agreed to help Beatrice, but asked her how she could know the way to Limbo and toward Hell, when she is blessed and in heaven. Beatrice answered that she had no fear of anything outside of heaven, and that God has made her nature such that nothing from below can do her any harm. Beatrice says that the Virgin Mary sent St. Lucy to her, to encourage her to help save Dante.

There is a kind of chain reaction stemming from God's love, through Mary and St. Lucy, through Beatrice, to Dante, showing that Beatrice's love can be seen as deriving from the ultimate love of God.

Virgil thus immediately sought out Dante after Beatrice visited him, and saved him from the wolf. Virgil chastises Dante for showing such cowardice, when three blessed women (the Virgin Mary, St. Lucy, and Beatrice) are supporting him, and when he is guiding him.

Virgil will continually chastise and scold Dante throughout the poem, as part of Dante's education and development into a pious soul worthy of not only great fame but entrance to Heaven.

Dante takes this encouragement to heart, and his spirits are raised like a drooping flower that suddenly blossoms in **light**. Dante says that he is now eager and resolved to begin his **journey**. He starts on the path, following behind his trusty guide Virgil.

Virgil's words have an almost magical effect on Dante, instantly raising his spirits. The connection of those words to light indicates the way that they are connected to the true path, to clarity, and to God.

CANTO 3

Dante and Virgil arrive at the gate of hell. Above the gate, there is an inscription on the lintel. The inscription says that this is the way to the city of desolation and eternal sorrow. It says that God, moved by justice, made the gate and tells all those who pass through it to abandon all hope. Virgil comforts the scared Dante and tells him not to fear.

The inscription's warning defines hell as a place of hopeless suffering and punishment, but nonetheless created out of divine justice. Dante, though, does have hope and is miraculously able to go through hell while still a living, earthly soul.

As they enter hell, Dante hears shrieks, shouts, screams, and lamentations filling the air. He asks Virgil who these suffering people are, and Virgil replies that they are people who were neither good nor evil in life. Together with the angels who sided with neither God nor Satan in their war, they dwell here at the edge of hell, rejected by both heaven and hell.

Being pious is more than a matter of simply not sinning. As these non-committal souls show, one must actively practice virtue and side oneself with God.

Dante sees these neutral souls, who committed neither to evil nor to good, chasing after a blank banner. They are naked and continually stung by wasps and hornets until they bleed. Worms consume the blood and tears they shed. Dante and Virgil then come to a river, with a crowd of people waiting at the riverbank. Virgil identifies the river as Acheron and as they approach, an old man named Charon comes near with a boat, to ferry souls across the river into hell.

The neutral souls receive a fitting punishment in hell: since they backed no clear side, they follow a banner that is blank, supporting no clear leader, and run back and forth with no direction. The idea of a fitting punishment is a crucial component of Dante's sense of divine justice, whereby punishment completes and perfects sin. Charon is a character from pagan mythology whom Dante incorporates into his Christian hell.


Charon tells the souls waiting by the river to despair and not hope for heaven. When he sees Dante, he tells him to leave, refusing to ferry across a living man. He tells Dante that this is not his **path**. But Virgil tells Charon that it is God's will for Dante to pass through hell while living. Charon relents, and begins rounding up the souls due for hell, whom Dante observes chattering with fear and cursing their fortune.

Charon is confused by Dante's transgressing the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead. Virgil convinces him to ferry Dante across the river, though, using only the power of his words, thereby relating the facts of God's will just as Dante is relating the details of hell.


Virgil tells Dante that these souls are all the people who have died under God's wrath, and that it is thus good that Charon told Dante this is not his **path**, as good souls do not come this way. Suddenly, there is a great earthquake, and Dante is so terrified that he faints.

Virgil hints that Dante is a good soul, but still has a long way to go (literally and figuratively) in becoming a truly virtuous, pious person. At this early stage in his journey, Dante is still easily susceptible to fear at the instruments of God's justice.

CANTO 4

Dante is reawakened by a loud peal of thunder. He looks around to try to figure out where he is and finds himself on the edge of the very pit of hell looking down into its chasm, which resounds with "infinite groans like gathered thunder," (4.9). He cannot see the bottom of the pit, which Virgil tells him they must journey down.

The "infinite groans" are the result of the suffering the souls in hell undergo as punishment for their sins. Their painful, inarticulate groans are in sharp contrast to Virgil and Dante's skilled speech.


Dante sees that Virgil is pale, and asks how he can be expected to go through hell, when even Virgil is frightened. But Virgil tells him that he is pale with pity for all the suffering souls in hell. Following behind Virgil, Dante enters the first circle of hell.

Virgil will later teach Dante not to feel pity for those who suffer punishment as part of God's divine justice. However, even he feels some pity for the damned souls. He may be Dante's poetic idol and model of virtue, but he's not perfect.

Dante hears not loud, suffering groans, but constant sighing. Virgil tells him that the souls in this first circle did not sin, but instead were either never baptized or lived before the time of Jesus (as Virgil himself did) and so were not practicing Christians. Virgil explains that those trapped here do not suffer, but live here in Limbo forever without any hope of progressing to heaven. Dante asks if anyone has ever made it from here to heaven, and Virgil tells of when Jesus came and rescued some chosen people from hell, including Adam, Noah, and David (all from the Old Testament).

As these souls demonstrate, even being virtuous is not enough to guarantee entrance to heaven. Limbo, as it is described here, offers Dante a way to exclude the pagan, non-Christian Greeks and Romans he admires from heaven while still respecting them and without subjecting them to the punishments found in the rest of hell.

Virgil identifies some of the souls for Dante: Homer and the Roman poets Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. These ancient poets come forward and speak with Virgil, who introduces them to Dante. They invite Dante into their group of esteemed poets.

These ancient writers are particularly admired by Dante for their poetic skill and excellence. Dante the author has them invite him (the character in his work) into their group as a way of asserting his own prominence and fame as a great poet.

Dante, now accompanied by these five ancient poets, comes upon a great castle, surrounded by walls. The group passes through the castle's gate and walks along a green meadow. Virgil points out to him a number of famous people from classical mythology and history: Electra, Hector, Aeneas, Caesar, and others. He also sees the medieval sultan Saladin (who fought against European crusaders), sitting alone.

Homer's Iliad tells the story of Hector, Virgil's Aeneid tells the story of Aeneas, and several Greek tragedies tell that of Electra. By including these characters in Limbo, Dante in some sense claims to subsume these great works in his own, all-encompassing epic. His poem contains elements of all the best classical works of literature, all wrapped into one (Christian) narrative.

Dante also sees the great luminaries of ancient philosophy: Socrates, Plato, Democritus, Heraclitus, Cicero, Seneca, and more. He sees Euclid, Ptolemy, and Galen (who studied and wrote about geometry, astronomy, and medicine, respectively). Dante says that he cannot list all that he saw, since "The wondrous truth outstrips my staggering pen," (4.147). Virgil and Dante leave the other poets behind, and move on further into hell, where there is no light whatsoever.

Dante claims that his pen cannot match the wonders he saw in hell, though elsewhere he is very confident in his poetic abilities. His naming of various great classical thinkers is a gesture of respect toward them, but also asserts his own superiority to them. They are, after all, trapped in Limbo, while he journeys on toward heaven.

CANTO 5

Dante and Virgil descend to the second circle of hell, where there is more suffering and screaming. Dante sees the monstrous Minos, the judge of the underworld in Greek mythology, judging and sentencing souls. When souls come before him, they can't help but confess all their sins. He then sends them to the appropriate area of hell. However many times Minos wraps his tail around himself, that is the numbered circle of hell to which the sinner must go.

Dante borrows Minos from Greek mythology, where he is also a judge of the underworld. (Dante adds in the detail of his monstrous tail.) The specificity of the punishments in hell—with souls going to a particular area of hell to receive a particular punishment—is an important element in God's plan of justice. Punishments are doled out not randomly, but appropriately to correspond with specific sins.

Minos sees the living Dante and stops him, but Virgil tells Minos that Dante is fated and willed by God to pass by, and that thus "hindrance is vain," (5.23). Dante and Virgil keep walking, and enter an area beset by great wind and storm, in which wailing souls are blown about without any hope of rest. Dante learns that these souls are those "carnal sinners" (5.37) who gave into lust.

Like Charon, Minos stops Dante because as a living soul he violates the normal functioning of hell. And just like before, Virgil clears the way with his powerful speech. Since the lustful sinners allowed themselves to be swept up by erotic passion, in hell they are fittingly punished by being endlessly blown about by actual winds.

Dante asks Virgil to identify some of the souls. Dante points out the Mistress of Babel, who legitimized her lustful activities with laws, thus protecting herself from punishment. Next he identifies Semiramis, queen of Babylon; Dido, who killed herself after Aeneas left her in Virgil's *Aeneid*; and Cleopatra. He also points out Helen, on whose behalf the Trojan War was waged; Paris, the Trojan prince who stole Helen from Greece; and many more Dante doesn't recount.

By including famous biblical and mythological (pagan) figures, Dante insinuates his own work into a lofty literary and cultural tradition. Now how Dante again reminds us of how the real wonder and awe of his journey cannot be grasped through his writing, since there are even more souls he saw than he can name.

Dante is moved by pity for these souls, and asks Virgil if he can speak to two of them, whom he sees floating "light as any foam," (5.74). Virgil tells him to wait until the two come nearer and to summon them by the power of love, which drives them. Dante calls to them and they come close, eager to speak with a living soul.

At this early stage of the journey, Dante feels pity for the sinners he encounters. These sinners are in thrall to a bad form of desire, in contrast to the chaste, sacred love between Dante and Beatrice.

One of the lustful souls tells Dante her life's story. Love was the downfall of her and the man she loved; both of them were murdered. Dante recognizes her as Francesca da Rimini, who fell in love with her husband's younger brother, Paolo (the other soul with Francesca in hell), and was killed by her husband. He tells her that her story makes him weep with pity, and he asks her to tell him more. She says that it is painful to remember the happier times of her life, but she agrees to tell more.

Francesca fell prey to a sinful form of desire, very different from Beatrice's love for Dante. Despite her suffering in hell, her ability to speak to Dante and tell her own story guarantees her fame in Dante's poem.

Francesca and Paolo passed the time innocently reading stories about Lancelot and his love for Queen Guinevere. As they read, they occasionally met each other's glances and, one time when they read about Lancelot and Guinevere kissing, they were overcome with desire and kissed each other. "We read no more that day," (5.138) summarizes Francesca. As Francesca tells her story, Paolo wails with grief and Dante is so overcome with pity that he swoons and faints.

Francesca's story demonstrates the apparent danger of erotic stories. Through the form of powerful literature, like the romances of King Arthur's court, lust is transmitted to Francesca and Paolo like a contagious disease. Unlike Francesca, Paolo cannot form articulate speech, but is in such misery that he can only wail. Although Francesca and Paolo are being punished justly by God, Dante is still overcome with pity for them.

CANTO 6

Dante comes to and finds himself in the third circle of hell, where rain never stops falling, mixed with sleet, snow, and hail. The horrid three-headed dog Cerberus continually mauls and bites the souls in this part of hell. The souls cry out and try to avoid the terrifying creature, but in vain.

Dante takes Cerberus from the underworld of Greek mythology, though here the creature is enlisted to help deliver the punishment ordained by God for sinners.

When Cerberus sees Dante and Virgil coming, Virgil scoops up several handfuls of dirt and throws some in each of the creature's mouths. This subdues Cerberus, allowing Dante and Virgil to pass by the suffering souls lying on the ground. One soul sits up and speaks to them, claiming that Dante knows him. Dante does not recognize the soul, who identifies himself as Ciacco, a citizen of Florence (where Dante is from). Ciacco says that he suffered from the sin of gluttony, as did all those in this circle of hell. Dante pities Ciacco and asks if he knows what will become of their city, Florence.

Ciacco is eager for the opportunity to speak with a living soul like Dante. While Dante is exploring the afterlife and journeying toward God, he is still troubled by earthly concerns, as his interest in Florence demonstrates. And many of the dead souls in hell have similar earthly concerns, wanting to know about goings in in the world regarding people and cities.

Ciacco foretells violence and turmoil for Florence between its different political factions, spurred on by Avarice, Envy, and Pride. Dante further asks Ciacco about various famous men of Florence who have died and Ciacco tells him that they are deeper in hell. Dante will see them when he ventures further below. Before falling back to the ground, Ciacco asks Dante to remember his name when he returns to earth.

From his position in hell, Ciacco is able to foresee events on earth. The favor he asks of Dante is an example of how earthly fame is the only (small) consolation souls in hell can hope for. By including Ciacco's name in his poem, Dante carries out Ciacco's request.

Virgil tells Dante that when the final judgment comes, these souls will be reunited with their earthly bodies. Dante asks if their pain will then be greater or lesser and Virgil explains that, since Judgment Day leads to the perfection of all things, their suffering, too, will be perfected. That is to say, their pains will be even worse. Virgil and Dante descend to the next circle of hell.

Here Virgil gives some further explanation of God's system of justice. God's judgment leads to the perfection of all things: for sinners, this means the corresponding and appropriate punishment and suffering that their sins require.

CANTO 7

At the entrance to the fourth circle of hell, Dante and Virgil encounter Pluto (the underworld deity associated with wealth in Roman mythology), who is hailing Satan. Virgil assures Dante that Pluto will not halt their **journey**, and he shouts at Pluto, telling him that it is willed by God for Virgil and Dante to pass this way. Pluto suddenly falls to the ground like a billowing sail when its mast snaps in a fierce wind.

Pluto is yet another character borrowed from pagan mythology. However, there is some debate as to whether Dante is referring to Pluto (the king of the underworld in Roman myth) or Plutus (the Greek god of wealth) here. In Dante's hell, this figure is guarding the fourth circle, but Virgil disposes of Pluto easily with his powerful words.

Dante wonders if he can do descriptive justice to what he beheld in this area of hell. He compares the souls ceaselessly rushing into each other to waves crashing against each other. Dante asks Virgil who these souls are. Noticing that many of them have bald heads, he asks if they were priests.

Dante again shows some (false?) modesty with regard to how well he can represent his experience in verse. It is at least somewhat ironic that this self-doubt is directly followed by a masterful epic simile of the battling souls to waves crashing together.

Virgil says that half of the souls were spendthrifts on earth, while the other half—with bald heads—were covetous popes and cardinals who hoarded money. Dante wonders if he knows any of these souls, but Virgil says that their suffering has rendered them indistinguishable as individuals. He explains that these souls either squandered or hoarded away what wealth they obtained through Fortune.

In addition to their punishment in hell, the sinners here suffer from being unrecognizable as individuals. They thus have no hope of their names living on in fame (through Dante's poem or otherwise) on earth.

Dante asks Virgil to tell him more about the nature of Fortune. According to Virgil, God established Fortune as a way of dividing up the world's riches among various nations and races. Fortune cannot be understood through science or logic, and men often foolishly blame Fortune for their misfortunes, but Fortune does not hear their curses. Virgil tells Dante that they should continue on their **journey**.

The personification of Fortune is a pagan idea (prominent in ancient Greek and Roman culture, for example), but Dante has Virgil modify Fortune to fit into a Christian framework. Still, the personified deity adds an oddly polytheistic aspect to Dante's Christianization of classical culture.

Dante and Virgil walk along a **dark**, bubbling body of water and the marsh which forms at the end of the river Styx. Dante spies naked, savage-looking souls covered in mud and mire in the dark marsh, fighting each other madly. Virgil identifies these souls as the wrathful. He says that the waters of the marsh constantly bubble because there are souls submerged below who constantly sigh in pain and their breath bubbles to the surface. These submerged souls took no joy in life; they were sullen on earth and now they lie sullen in the mud. Virgil leads Dante around the edge of the marshy waters, until they arrive at a large tower.

The wrathful and the sullen are two more examples of fitting punishments in hell. The wrathful are forced to fight forever, the sullen to wallow in the mud. By punishing sinners in this appropriate way, God's justice perfects the sinner's actions, as if their sins need their corresponding punishments to be completed.

CANTO 8

Dante sees two **lights** at the top of the tower and sees a beacon far off flicker as if answering the lights on the tower. He asks Virgil what the lights mean, and Virgil says that the lights are signaling their arrival, and points out that a boat is arriving for them. The boat comes close, piloted by a spirit Virgil recognizes as Phlegyas. Virgil tells Phlegyas that he must ferry Dante and him across the Styx.

Virgil again uses his words to make the inhabitants of hell help Dante along his journey, this time with Phlegyas, a character from Greek mythology who ferries Dante across the Styx, an underworld river also from Greek myth.


As Dante and Virgil ride through the marshy Styx, a soul sits up through the grime and asks Dante who he is: "Who are thou, come here before thy time?" (8.34) Dante responds that he is not staying in hell, and asks who the spirit is. The spirit merely replies that he is one who weeps. Dante curses the filthy spirit, which then tries to lay hands on the boat, but Virgil pushes him back into the mire.

This angry spirit (Filippo Argenti) accosts Dante because he is a living soul transgressing the boundary between earth and the afterlife. He does not name himself, perhaps as an attempt to avoid the shame of infamy at being memorialized in Dante's poem as a sinner.

Virgil tells Dante that this spirit was arrogant on earth and that, "Many who strut like kings up there are such / As here shall wallow hog-like in the mud," (8.49-50). Dante sees the arrogant spirit get attacked by other muddy souls in Styx, who call out, "Have at Filippo Argenti!" (8.61) Argenti begins to bite and hurt himself, as Dante and Virgil move along in the boat.

Argenti's punishment is, as Virgil explains, a fitting reversal: arrogant and haughty on earth, he wallows in the lowly mud in hell.

Virgil announces that they are approaching the city of Dis, and Dante sees a city with buildings **glowing** red. Virgil explains that they glow from the endless fires that burn in the lower regions of hell. Their boat circles around the moat surrounding the city, before Phlegyas shows them the gate.

The glowing city of Dis is a rare example of light in hell, but the light is caused not by God or heaven but rather by the burning fires that punish sinners within. Still, even the city of Dis, full of suffering, is ultimately of God's design.

Around the gate, more than a thousand spirits of fallen angels congregate and ask why a living man is walking through hell. Virgil tries to speak with them, but they tell him to leave Dante behind and stay with them in Dis. Dante is terrified and begs Virgil not to leave him. He says that if they cannot move forward, they should turn back. Virgil tells him not to worry and assures him that nothing can stop their divinely willed **journey**, and that he will not leave Dante alone.

Dante is again a source of amazement because he is a living inhabitant of earth who walks through hell. Remarkably, even Virgil's words are to no avail here. Dante is understandably frightened, though Virgil tells him to keep faith in their divinely approved journey.

Dante, though, is so terrified that he hardly hears Virgil's reassurances. The fallen angels slam the gate to Dis shut in Virgil's face, and Dante continues to worry. Once again, Virgil assures him that nothing can get in their way. He says that someone is already coming to "unbar to us the gates of Dis," (8.130).

Virgil tries to assuage Dante's fears, but even his reassuring words—which earlier raised Dante's spirits instantly—fail to have an effect on him. As Dante and Virgil move deeper into the circles of hell more (though certainly not all) of the inhabitants seem to continue to try to resist God.

CANTO 9

Even Virgil is pale with fear at being refused entry to the city of Dis. He voices a worry that the angel coming to help them is taking too long. Dante asks him if anyone has made this journey past the gate before and Virgil tells him that he did once before, when he was sent to fetch a soul from the deepest, **darkest** circle of hell. Virgil reassures Dante that he knows the way.

Dante is beginning to have doubts about his journey, even though it is willed by heaven. Like Dante's excessive pity, this could be seen as an affront to God's divine plan. However, even Virgil is fearful at this moment.

Virgil keeps talking, but Dante stops following what he is saying, as he is distracted by the tops of the towers of Dis, **glowing** with flames. There, he sees three female figures appear: the Furies. They are covered in blood and have snakes around their brows. Virgil instantly recognizes them and names them individually: Allecto, Megaera, and Tisiphone. The furies shriek loudly and call for Medusa to come and turn the two poets to stone. Virgil tells Dante to cover his eyes, because if he is turned to stone by Medusa he will be trapped in hell forever.

Virgil's words again fail to have their usual effect on Dante here. The Furies and Medusa are monsters from classical mythology (hence easily recognizable for Virgil), whom Dante places in his frightening hell. It seems that the forces of hell may overwhelm Dante and Virgil, may turn them to stone and trap them in hell…

But just then, Dante hears a loud crashing noise and turns to see an angel coming toward them across the Styx, walking on water and parting the crowd of souls in its way. The angel touches the gate with a wand and it opens instantly, with no resistance. The angel tells the inhabitants of Dis to stop trying to thwart the will of God, and then leaves without speaking to Dante or Virgil.

… but then the angel almost effortlessly clears the way for Dante and Virgil, sending the Furies and fallen angels away with the power of its speech. The angel's ease in opening the door despite the resistance of the fallen angels, furies, and others reasserts even more clearly the absolute might of God's divine will.

Under the protection of the angel's words, Dante and Virgil proceed into Dis. Dante looks around and sees a plain filled with sepulchers, with flames flaring up in between them. The tombs are left open and are burning in the flames. He hears screams from those inside the tombs.

The protection offered by the angel is through its words, which are in some sense a proxy for the very word of God. As Dante and Virgil go deeper into hell, the punishments become more extreme as they are perfections of more extreme sins.

Dante asks Virgil who these people are in the burning tombs, and Virgil says that they are "heresiarchs", leaders of heretical sects and their followers. The two poets continue on their **journey**, walking past the blazing tombs.

Heretics deliberately defy God and, as such, are denied the ease of death—they are placed in tombs in which they live and burn indefinitely. Later in the Inferno Virgil will explain to Dante why some sinners exist within Dis while others (those Dante has encountered up until now) are punished outside the walls of Dis.

CANTO 10

While still walking by the heretics' tombs, Dante asks Virgil if he can see the souls who are inside the tombs, since all the tombs lids are off. Virgil says he can, and hints that he understands why Dante is really asking this (he wants to see if anyone he knew from Florence is here). Virgil points out a group of tombs containing the followers of Epicurus, a Greek philosopher who thought that the soul did not live on after death.

Even in the midst of his miraculous journey through the afterlife, Dante is interested in finding someone from Florence he might recognize. Epicurus's followers sin against God by not believing in the immortality of the soul. The entire concept of the afterlife described in Inferno is based on the immortality of the soul.

Just then, a voice from one of the tombs interrupts Dante and Virgil, calling out to Dante as a living Tuscan. Virgil encourages Dante to go see the spirit, who turns out to be Farinata, a fellow Florentine. Farinata asks who Dante is and when Dante tells him, Farinata says that their families have long feuded.

The local feuds between families in Florence are still a matter of concern for Farinata, even as he spends eternity suffering in hell. This particular feud refers to the fact that Farinata stood on the side of the Ghibellines (supporting the Holy Roman Emperor over the Pope) while Dante was a Guelph (supporting the Pope over the Holy Roman Emperor). This political conflict motivated much of the political strife in Florence and across all of Italy when Dante wrote.

Another suffering soul interrupts Farinata and Dante, asking why his son is not with Dante. Dante recognizes this soul as Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, the father of his friend Guido. Dante says he comes this way because of God's will and suggests that maybe Guido disdained God. Hearing Dante use the past tense in this way, Cavalcante assumes that Guido has died, and drops back down into his tomb, mourning. Farinata picks up where he left off, discussing Florence.

Cavalcante is also concerned with earthly matters. Like reputation or fame, his son offers a way for him (or at least his family name) to continue to live on earth, so he is greatly pained when he thinks that his son has died. The inclusion of both Farinata and Cavalcante in this section compares the love of city evident in Farinata and the family love shown by Cavalcante, not indicating one as greater than the other but showing the power of each.

Dante asks Farinata how it is that he and other souls in hell seem to be able to foretell the future, but cannot know the present. Farinata answers that souls here can only see distant things—the future and past, but not the present. He can sometimes see glimmers of God's **light** from afar but when it comes near in some form, he cannot see it clearly. Feeling pity, Dante asks Farinata to tell Cavalcante that Guido is still alive.

As Farinata informs Dante, souls in the next world have a privileged vantage point from which they can see the earthly future. However, they are blind to what is directly in front of them, which is a kind of punishment in itself as they are left wondering about what is going on to those they knew and cared about. Dante is moved by pity for the punishment of his friend's father.

Virgil urges Dante to hurry along, but before he does Dante asks Farinata to tell him quickly some of the other spirits in this part of hell. Farinata names King Frederick II and points out a cardinal, but refuses to name any others. Dante and Virgil continue walking and Virgil tells him that he will understand everything when he is basking in the glorious **light** of heaven. They take a path toward the center of Dis, from where Dante smells noxious fumes rising up.

Dante's request for Farinata to name other spirits arises out of Dante's desire to learn more about hell. Frederick II was a Holy Roman Emperor who died in 1250, about fifty years before Dante wrote the Inferno. The placement of Frederick II in hell represents Dante's beliefs as a Guelph. At the same time, Dante's respectful interaction with Farinata hints at a further political factor: that the Guelph's had in fact split into two factions: one which wanted Florence to be independent, the other which preferred to work with the Pope. Dante belonged to the former faction, and had been exiled when the latter had taken power in 1302 (Dante wrote Inferno during his exile). In exile, Dante felt a kind of connection with Ghibellines like Farinata, as the Ghibellines had been banished a decade or so earlier.

CANTO 11

Dante and Virgil reach the edge of a cliff overlooking the descent to the lower parts of hell, whose overpowering stench Dante can already smell. The two poets take a break in their journey and see a vault with these words written on it: "I hold Pope Anastasius, / Lured by Photinus from the pathway true," (10.8-9). Virgil tells Dante that they should rest here until they are accustomed to the foul stench of the lower circles of hell.

As the vault holding Pope Anastasius shows, even popes can sin and find themselves punished by God—and later Dante will show some other Popes in hell who were more contemporary with Dante's life. The constant foul stench of the lower parts of hell emphasizes its strangeness and difference from Dante's earthly world.

While they are waiting, Virgil explains some of the geography of hell. Looking down into the abyss, Virgil says that there are three circles of hell within the cliffs leading downwards, all filled with damned spirits. Virgil says that all wrongs against heaven end up getting punished. According to Virgil, God hates fraud and deceit the most, so the fraudulent inhabit the lowest parts of hell.

Virgil instructs Dante in God's divine plan of justice. The layout of hell is extremely specific, with more heinous sins getting the more serious punishments that they deserve deeper in hell. Fraud is the most hated sin because it stands most in contrast to love: fraud or deceit breaks the bonds of love by destroying trust.

In the seventh circle of hell, says Virgil, souls are punished for sins of violence. They are divided into groups based on who they have harmed: other humans, themselves, or God. In the first group are murderers, robbers, and plunderers. In the second are those who "their own lives or their own goods destroy," (11.41) by committing suicide or by gambling and wasting away their property. The third group includes those who curse, deny, or defame God, as well as usurers and followers of Sodom.

This division and organization of sinners within hell's different areas is crucial to the idea of divine justice offered by Dante. Hell is not a place of random violence, but rather an organized system whereby sinners get the very particular punishments they need. That order is based upon the central importance of God. Harming God is thus the worst category of offenses. Harming oneself is considered worse than harming others because it involves harming a gift that God gave to you: your life and soul.

Virgil continues to explain the layout of hell in the lower circles full of frauds: in the eight circle are "hypocrites, flatterers, dealers in sorcery, / Panders and cheats, and all such filthy stuff," (10.58-59). The ninth circle contains those who are guilty of even more serious fraud and betrayal. At the very core of Dis are traitors. Dante asks Virgil why hell is arranged in this way, with some damned souls suffering outside of Dis.

At this point, Dante does not fully understand the reasoning behind God's design of hell. Virgil will then instruct him (and the reader).

Virgil calls Dante foolish and reminds him that, as Aristotle teaches in his *Ethics*, there are three kinds of sin: incontinence (inability to control oneself), vice, and bestiality (violence). Those outside of Dis have committed the first, less serious wrong, and so suffer slightly less than their counterparts within Dis.

As Virgil explains, the divisions of hell are directly related to the different kinds of possible sins, which require different kinds of suffering.

Dante then asks Virgil why usury (money-lending with excessive interest) is so wrong. According to Virgil, humans are supposed to follow nature, as made by God. A usurer makes a life not from nature or labor, but from charging interest on other people's profits and thus scorns nature. Virgil then tells Dante that it is time for them to resume their journey.

This slight digression exemplifies an understanding of sin as any deviation from God's design or plan as manifest in nature. (In this case, usury contradicts the natural way of making a living from working the land.)

CANTO 12

Dante and Virgil find a way down from the precipice into the seventh circle, but their path is blocked by the minotaur, a half-bull, half-human creature of Greek mythology born from the union of a woman and a bull. Virgil insults the minotaur, and it goes mad, thrashing about at random, allowing Dante and Virgil to sneak past it.

Dante borrows the monstrous minotaur from Greek mythology (where it is defeated by the hero Theseus). Here, Virgil overcomes it with nothing but his clever use of language.

Virgil explains to Dante that the path down through the cliffs was created by the massive earthquake when Jesus went into the first circle of hell to rescue certain souls. He says that at that moment, the universe "trembled in the throes of love," (12.42). Virgil then points out the river Phlegethon, full of boiling blood, where those who committed violence against others are.

The power with which Jesus made hell quake is seen in terms of the divine love that is the basis for the entire universe. The juxtaposition of this idea of love with the tortuous imagery of the Phlegethon may seem jarring, but part of Dante's point is that even the horrible sufferings of hell are (as paradoxical as it may seem) ultimately the result of God's love. Having to be immersed in boiling blood to the degree that matches up with the amount of violence one committed in life seems a fitting punishment, indeed.

Dante sees centaurs (half-man, half-horse creatures) all around the banks of the Phlegethon with bows and arrows. Upon seeing Dante and Virgil, one of them stops them and orders them to identify themselves and their punishments in hell. Virgil identifies this centaur as Nessus, and rebukes him. He then points out to Dante the centaur Chiron, who taught Achilles, and another centaur named Pholus. Virgil explains that the centaurs stand guard at the banks of the river to prevent any suffering souls from escaping it.

Virgil recognizes the centaurs as creatures of classical mythology. Dante has them guard the banks of the Phlegethon, helping to carry out Hell's punishments. The centaurs are hostile until Virgil speaks to them.

Chiron notices that Dante is a living soul and Virgil explains to him that he is leading Dante on a quest through hell ordained by heaven. Virgil asks Chiron to help them across the river and asks a centaur to let Dante ride him as they ford across the river. (Unlike the dead souls who can walk on air, Dante would be unable to walk across the boiling river.) Chiron has Nessus help them across the river.

Chiron is surprised by Dante's transgressing the borders between the living and the dead. The oddness of Dante's position is emphasized when he has to ride Nessus across the river, whereas the dead souls can merely float across on the air.

While walking along the riverbank, Dante looks at some of the souls submerged in the river and Nessus points out where the tyrants are in the river. He identifies Alexander the Great, among others. Further along the river, Nessus shows Dante Guy de Montfort, who murdered Prince Henry of England. Nessus, Dante, and Virgil come to a shallow part of the river, where they can cross. After crossing, Nessus describes how the river gets deeper and deeper and at its deepest completely submerges tyrants like Attila the Hun. He then turns to go back to the other centaurs.

In mentioning the names of great historical figures like Alexander the Great, Dante helps record their fame, while also contributing to his own: their presence in his poem and on his journey magnifies the grandeur of his own story. At the same time, placing these heroes in Hell also glorifies God, as these heroes must, like everyone else, submit to the order of God's universe and accept punishment for sins against God's moral order.

CANTO 13

Virgil and Dante come upon a **dark** forest filled with old, gnarled trees and devoid of any greenery. Here are the harpies, horrible part-woman part-bird monsters of Greek mythology. The harpies roost in the trees and release terrible shrieks. Virgil tells Dante that they are now in the second ring of the seventh circle of hell. Dante hears screaming all around him but does not see anyone. He looks around, confused.

Dante takes the harpies from Greek mythology, where they are also fearsome monsters. All of the screaming that Dante hears is evidence of the great suffering of souls around him that cannot speak to identify themselves.

Virgil tells Dante to pluck a small branch from a tree. When Dante does this, the tree cries out in pain, asking him "Why dost thou rend my bones?" (13.35) and bleeds. The tree explains that all the trees in the forest were once humans. Virgil apologizes to the tree but says that only by plucking a branch could Dante believe that the trees used to be people. Virgil asks the tree to tell Dante who it used to be.

In being transformed into a tree, this soul has lost its identity to some degree. Speaking to Dante, though, might offer it an opportunity to attain some kind of individual fame in Dante's narrative.

The tree says that it will speak because of Virgil's kind words and answers that it was the man who held the keys to Frederick II's heart and advised the emperor. Envy drove people against him, though, who convinced Frederick himself to distrust him. He then killed himself. Though he does not identify himself by name, he is Pier delle Vigne. Pier says that he was never unfaithful to Frederick and asks for Dante to heal his reputation on earth. Virgil encourages Dante to ask Pier more questions.

Virgil's powerful words persuade the otherwise reticent tree to speak. Pier begs Dante to ameliorate his bad reputation back on earth, because his reputation is the only part of him that survives outside of hell.

Dante says that he cannot think of anything more to ask Pier, because he is so stirred by pity. So, Virgil asks Pier to tell Dante how he became a tree, and whether any of the trees in this forest will ever be released from this form. According to Pier, when someone commits suicide, his or her soul is sent by Minos to the seventh circle of hell. There, it falls somewhere in the forest, sprouts "like a corn of wheat," (13.99) and grows into a tree. The harpies then feed on the trees' leaves, which causes the trees great pain.

Dante's excessive pity incapacitates and almost paralyzes him (just as it earlier made him faint around Francesca). The suicides' punishment is fitting in that, having disdained their bodies by enacting their own death, they are now separated from their bodies and transformed into something else (trees).

Pier continues to explain that on Judgment Day, the souls will be reunited with their former bodies, but the bodies will hang upon the trees, rather than being truly reintegrated with their souls. Suddenly, Dante hears a loud noise and turns to see two naked men sprinting through the forest, chased by hounds. One cries out for death to come, and the other teases the first (whom he calls Lano) before hiding in a bush. The hounds find the man in the bush and tear him limb from limb.

Judgment Day, the culmination of God's divine justice, perfects hell's punishments by reuniting bodies and souls. However, the suicides are fittingly doomed to be always separated from the bodies they so willingly threw away in killing themselves.

Virgil guides Dante to the bush, which is itself trying to speak. It cries out in pain (its leaves and branches have been torn in the commotion), asking Jacomo (the man who hid in the bush) why he tried to hide there. Virgil asks the bush who it once was. The bush asks Virgil and Dante to gather its scattered leaves and says that it was a Florentine who hanged himself.

Even in the bush's transformed and injured state, it still has a voice and is able to speak. However, it does not attain fame because it does not tell Dante its name. It is possible that the soul avoids naming itself because of shame at having killed itself.

CANTO 14

Moved by love for his native city of Florence, Dante gathers the scattered leaves and returns them to the bush, before continuing to follow Virgil toward the third ring of the seventh circle. The two poets come upon a desert surrounded by the forest they have just been walking through. Dante sees different groups of naked, suffering souls throughout the desert. Some lie supine on their backs, while others squat in the sand, and some wander about. The fewest souls were lying down, but Dante notes that their screams were the loudest.

Dante's love for his native city is another example of love as a positive motivating force. Indeed, love for one's nation or native city is important in Dante's conception of piety: those who betray their countrymen have (as we will later see) a specific part of hell.

All over the desert, "huge flakes of fire," (14.29) fall like snow, keeping the desert sands hot and burning the souls suffering there. Dante compares the falling fire to the fireballs that enemies of Alexander the Great shot at his army in India. Dante sees one gigantic man lying in the desert, "scorning the flame," (14.47) as if it does not burn him. The man himself answers, crying out that he will not let Jove (the king of the Roman gods) have the pleasure of vengeance. Virgil identifies him as Capaneus.

Dante's simile about snow tries to find an earthly comparison by which he can convey the strangeness of the fire falling from the sky here, even as it is stranger than anything Dante can compare it to.

Virgil explains to Dante that Capaneus was a king who besieged Thebes and made light of God. Even in hell, he resists and scorns god. Dante and Virgil continue walking around the edge of the desert (Virgil tells Dante to be careful not to tread on the burning sand). They come to where a red river begins to flow from the edge of the forest, with its banks turned to stone. Virgil tells Dante that this stream deserves Dante's wonder more than anything else they have seen in hell, as it puts out the flames on its riverbanks.

Capaneus is an interesting example of Dante's incorporation of classical characters into his Christian poem. Capaneus' scorning Jove, the king of the Roman gods, becomes here a denial of the Christian God. Part of Dante's achievement in Inferno is the detailed specificity of the hell he creates, which is on display here in the description of the river.

Virgil then tells Dante about the source of hell's rivers. Under the island of Crete there is a giant man with a golden head, silver arms and chest, a brass torso, iron legs, and one foot made of clay. His tears run down, gather, and flow underground into hell, forming Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon, then Cocytus, the lake at the bottom of hell.

The giant man is an allegory for the ages of history (declining from the golden age to the iron age). The clay foot is often understood to represent the church, which Dante (among many others) considered to be corrupted or unstable. The fact that hell's rivers originate from just underneath the island of Crete suggests that hell (which is below earth's surface) and earth are closely connected.

Dante questions Virgil further, asking where Lethe, the other river of the classical underworld, is. Virgil answers that Lethe is beyond the pit of hell, in purgatory. There, souls wash off their guilt and sins. Virgil leads Dante along the banks of the river, cautioning him not to walk on the burning sands beyond the riverbanks.

Dante takes the Lethe, the river of forgetfulness in Greek mythology, and makes it function in his Christian conception of the afterlife as the way in which souls "forget" their sins in order to progress toward heaven.

CANTO 15

Leaving the forest behind, Dante and Virgil walk along the narrow path made by the banks of the Phlegethon. A large group of souls sees the two poets, and one of them comes forward and accosts Dante. Dante looks at the spirit's face and recognizes him as Brunetto Latini, his old teacher. Dante asks to sit with Brunetto to talk, but Brunetto says that if he rests for even a second, he would have to lie in the sands for a hundred years. He tells Dante to keep walking, so he can walk alongside him.

Latini is eager to speak with someone he knew on earth. Dante's inclusion of his friend and fellow Guelph in The Inferno is ambiguously both complimentary and critical. Dante immortalizes Latini in his famous poem, but by including him in hell also accuses him of being an impious sinner, in this case someone who practiced sodomy. At the same time, one could argue that by including a friend in hell Dante is rightly insisting that following the right path is the only way to avoid hell and get to heaven. Had Dante only put his political rivals—such as Ghibellines or Black Guelphs—in hell, it would have implied that he was being unfair in who he assigned to hell, prioritizing politics over conscience.


Dante explains to Brunetto how he found himself in the **dark** wood and is now being guided by Virgil through hell. Brunetto encourages him to keep on his journey so that he will reach heaven. He says that he regrets he died early, or else he would have given Dante advice and counsel in life. He predicts that "Fortune has honours for [Dante]," (15.70) and Dante laments Brunetto's death, calling him a father figure. Dante is thankful for Brunetto's prediction of good fortune, but does not put too much stock in it, saying he is ready for whatever capricious Fortune may bring him.

Latini predicts great fortune and fame for Dante (which, in the context of Dante's poem is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy). Like a good, pious soul who has learned well from his master Virgil, Dante avoids arrogance and says that he will be ready for whatever God sends his way through Fortune.


Dante asks Brunetto to name some of the more famous sinners who are in his group, wandering about the desert sands. Brunetto says that the group is full of learned men and scholars, who sinned against nature and their own bodies. (These are all categorized under the general term of Sodomites.) He names Priscian and Francis of Accorso and, before running off, asks Dante to remember his work, the *Thesaurus*, in which he lives on. As Brunetto leaves, Dante thinks that his friend looks like the winning runner in a race.

Latini's request for Dante to mention his great work shows how important some kind of fame (whether achieved through great deeds or through literary achievement) is for souls like him. Dante's odd comparison of him to a runner winning a race is perhaps a kind gesture toward his friend, an attempt to describe him in some good way, even as he is doomed to hell.


CANTO 16

As Dante and Virgil continue along the river, Dante can start to hear the waterfall where the river drops off into the circle below. Three souls see Dante and recognize him as a fellow Florentine. They run up to him and Dante is horrified by their burns and scars, but Virgil tells him to listen to them.

The three Florentines are eager to speak to someone from their own city. Even in the afterlife they (and Dante) feel a very significant attachment to their local home on earth.

Dante stops and the three Florentines form a circle, so that that they can keep moving around while talking to him. They introduce themselves as three famous, noble Florentines: Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, and Jacopo Rusticucci. Dante tells them that he hesitated to speak with them not out of scorn but out of grief at seeing such noble men being punished here. He tells them that he is indeed from Florence and that he is being guided through hell so that he can eventually "seek the sweet fruit promised by my sure guide" (16.62)—that is, ascend to heaven.

Even though these souls are justly punished by God, Dante is upset at seeing such noblemen suffering so harshly. Dante's conversation with them allows them to further guarantee their earthly fame by being included in Dante's poem.


Jacopo wishes for Dante to have a long life and to live on in fame after his death. He asks how Florence is now faring, because he has heard from another Florentine who recently joined the band of Sodomites that the city is not doing well. Dante answers by proclaiming aloud that Florence is suffering from excess and pride in its citizens. The three Florentines praise Dante for his power of speech and ask him to speak of them when he returns to earth. They run off through the burning desert sands, letting Dante and Virgil resume their path.

Jacopo encourages Dante to seek immortality through fame. While Dante does seek fame, he also seeks a truer form of immortality—salvation in heaven. The Florentines, unable to see the present clearly, are greatly concerned with the status of Florence. And note that Dante, also concerned for Florence, takes a swipe at those who now run Florence, who are the same people that exiled him. The three noble Florentine's praise for Dante's skilled speech shows that Dante is growing over the course of his journey, learning from the eloquent example of Virgil.



Dante and Virgil arrive at the waterfall where the Phlegethon falls down into the eighth circle. Dante compares the huge waterfall to a waterfall in the Appenine mountains of Italy. Dante is at this point wearing a rope as a belt and Virgil takes it and throws it over the precipice of the waterfall. Dante thinks that something will come from this signal, and Virgil, as if reading his mind, says that the thing he seeks will indeed come quickly. Dante warns his readers that what he is about to describe will seem unbelievable, but he implores them to believe that he saw a strange shape rise from the waterfall, which he compares to a diver who goes underwater to loosen a stuck anchor.

Here Dante stresses the strangeness of his marvelous experience, worrying that his words will seem unbelievable. At the same time, the only way he can try to communicate his experience is by likening it to something his readers have seen on earth: thus he compares the Phlegethon's massive waterfall to a waterfall in an Italian mountain range. Dante's afterlife is constantly in tension between being utterly different from and eerily similar to our world.


CANTO 17

A terrifying monster with a "stinging tail," (17.1) rises up from the waterfall with a man's face but with a monstrous body of all sorts of colors, with two huge forepaws. The monster hangs at the edge of the cliff, whipping its tail through the air like a scorpion's. (Though not yet named, this is Geryon, a monster from classical mythology.) Virgil tells Dante that they must walk over to this beast. As they approach, Dante sees a group of souls sitting in the sand and Virgil tells him to go speak with them while he (Virgil) gets the monster to help transport them down below.

Once again, Virgil uses his skill with words to get a mythological monster to help Dante on his Christian journey. He encourages Dante to talk to the sinners sitting in the sand so that he can learn more about the various punishments of hell and perhaps begin to move from pitying such sinners to a pious acceptance of God's justice.



Dante goes alone to the souls sitting in the hot sand and does not recognize any of them. However, he sees that they all have purses tied around their necks, which they all stare at. Each individual's purse has a different image from his family's coat of arms. One of these suffering souls asks Dante what he is doing in hell and tells him to go away. Dante returns to Virgil, who tells him to mount Geryon. Dante is frightened and means to ask Virgil to help him hold onto the monster, but his voice fails. Virgil holds Dante securely anyway, and commands Geryon to fly down gently to the next circle.

These souls are usurers, whose obsession with money is punished in hell as they endlessly stare at their purses. The implication is that usurers are obsessed with money in life—making money their life—and so in hell they are made to do the same. Dante's fright temporarily takes away his ability to speak, though in recalling the event in his writing he is able to revisit the scene with his normal eloquence.

Geryon sets off from the cliff (Dante compares him to a boat leaving its dock and returning to sea) and Dante describes himself as being more terrified during the flight than Icarus was when he fell from the sky. They fly in gradually lowering circles, and Dante sees the seething waterfall at their side. Circling like a hawk, Geryon finally lands and sets Virgil and Dante down safely in the eighth circle of hell, before bounding off.

Dante compares his experience to the everyday world (with the boat) and the world of classical myth (with Icarus). By claiming that his ride on Geryon (a monster of Greek myth) is stranger and more terrifying than either he elevates his story, and the world of hell, beyond either the real world or the world of myth.

CANTO 18

Virgil and Dante are now in the eighth circle of hell, reserved for those who committed fraud. The region is also known as Malebolge ("evil trenches") because it is made up of ten huge, circular stone trenches surrounding a well at the center, almost like defensive trenches surrounding a military stronghold. Dante follows Virgil onward, as he sees numerous suffering souls filling the first, outermost trench.

The eighth circle is the most specifically organized of any Dante has seen so far, with ten separate trenches where different kinds of sinners receive intricately appropriate punishments. The eighth and ninth circles of hell are reserved for the worst sinners—those guilty of various forms of malice, or fraud.

At the bottom of the trench, naked souls run from one end of the ditch to the other. At each end, devils are posted at the top of the wall, looking down into the trench. They whip the souls, driving them back and forth. Dante recognizes one of these suffering souls and wonders who he is. Virgil allows him to stop and look more closely at the person. The soul tries to hide his face but Dante recognizes him as Venedico Caccianemico and asks how he has ended up here.

Venedico tries to hide his face because, unlike other souls who ask for Dante to remember them, he does not want his particular sin to be remembered. These sinners were basically human traffickers, selling women and moving them from place to place. Now they themselves are driven from place to place by the demons.

Venedico says that he would rather not answer, but that Dante's clear words compel him to. He admits that he sold his sister to a lustful nobleman. He says that he is far from the only man from Bologna in this part of hell, which is full of them. A devil whips Venedico, forcing him to continue his running back and forth, so Dante returns to Virgil. The two poets climb up a ridge that bridges across the trench. As they walk, Virgil points out among the deceivers the soul of Jason, a famous hero of Greek mythology. Virgil explains that Jason is being punished for deceiving two women who loved him: Hypsipyle and Medea.

Dante's speech has a persuasive power similar to Virgil's, as he compels Venedico to tell his story. Dante also used Venedico to take a broad swipe at Bologna.Dante includes the Greek hero of Jason in his version of hell, rewriting the mythological hero into a deceiver of women.

Dante and Virgil now come to the edge of the second trench. Dante can hardly see to the trench's bottom, where souls are plunged in a lake of foul dung. He looks closely at one in particular, who angrily asks Dante why he stares at him out of all the suffering souls here. Dante recognizes him as Alessio Interminei and Alessio admits that he has been relegated to this trench because he was a flatterer. Before moving on, Virgil points out one more sinner: a courtesan named Thais who compared sex with her lovers to a miracle. Now she scratches at herself with her own filthy nails. Virgil says that they have seen enough here, and the two poets resume their journey.

Here, flatterers and deceptive speakers are mired in the very filth their speech consisted of. Their abuse of language is in stark contrast to Virgil and Dante's noble, powerful eloquence. At the same time, Dante's willingness to describe the flatterers in their excrement shows his ability and comfort in moving from the high to the low in his poetry—describing the hero Jason in the scene before and how describing in detail the flatterers covered in shit.

CANTO 19

Dante and Virgil arrive in the third trench, which holds Simonists, those who bought or sold sacred things like the sacraments, church offices, or pardons. Dante praises God's judgment as he sees that the stone here is dotted with many holes, into which the Simonists have put their heads and torsos, with their legs and feet sticking out. The ground flickers with flames, burning the soles of their feet. Dante thinks the holes look like the circular "holes" that priests stand in to conduct baptisms and remembers how he once broke one in order to save a child who was trapped in it.

Now we can see Dante beginning to change. Instead of pity, he reacts to the suffering of the Simonists with satisfaction. To some this may seem cold or cruel, but in Dante's understanding of the world, one should not pity or regret the punishment that God wisely deals out to the sinners who deserve it.

Dante asks who one of the souls is, who seems to be burned even worse than the others. Virgil takes him down closer to the Simonists, and Dante asks the sinner who he is, saying that he feels like a friar about to receive a confession. The sinner thinks that Pope Boniface is talking to him, and he bitterly asks if he has died already. Virgil has Dante tell the sinner that he is not Boniface and the sinner identifies himself as Pope Nicholas III. He says that other Simonists are buried deeper in the hole and that when his successor Boniface comes, he will take his place, pushing Nicholas down further into the hole.

With this scene, Dante is able to use his journey through hell to comment on and deeply criticize the Catholic church of his time. Nicholas III was pope when Dante was a boy. By placing a Pope among the Simonists Dante is condemning the Catholic Church as a whole for trading in cash (for instance, the sale of indulgences) in specific, and for seeking secular power in general. Dante felt the Church and State should be separate, and that the Church should actively avoid secular power. Dante did strongly hate Pope Boniface, who worked to get the Black Guelphs into power, resulting in Dante and other White Guelphs being exiled from Florence.

Pope Nicholas predicts that after Boniface there will be an even more evil pope. Dante chastises Nicholas, asking him how much Jesus charged Peter for the keys to the kingdom of heaven (nothing). He tells Nicholas that he deserves his punishment and says that he would use even harsher words if he didn't have so much respect for the papal office. He tells Nicholas that he has treated gold and silver as divine, instead of God. Upon hearing this, Nicholas writhes more and more in pain. Virgil approves of Dante's harsh speech and carries him back up to the path leading to the next trench.

Dante continues to use the character of Pope Nicholas to criticize the church of his time. He is here essentially telling Nicholas that he and others in the church who want earthly wealth and power have established money as their God rather than worshipping the true God. Far from pitying Pope Nicholas, Dante takes this opportunity to increase his suffering, showing that he piously approves of Nicholas' deserved punishment. Virgil, meanwhile, approves of Dante's growth in piously approving of the treatment of sinners.

CANTO 20

In the next (fourth) trench, Dante sees souls weeping quietly, their heads turned completely around so that they have to walk backwards. At this sight of such bodily disfigurement (Dante describes the sinners' tears welling up and streaming down their backs), Dante begins to weep. Virgil chides him for this, and tells him he can choose between pity and piety. Since this punishment is ordered by God as justice, he rhetorically asks Dante, "Who's wickeder than one / That's agonized by God's high equity?" (20.30)

Despite Dante's apparent move away from pity in the last canto, the bodily disfigurement of the souls in this fourth trench causes Dante to weep with pity. This gives Virgil the chance to re-emphasize how all of the suffering in hell is part of God's divine justice. To weep at what God has rightly ordered against the wicked is itself wicked, as he teaches Dante.

Virgil tells Dante to look at one of the backwards-facing souls, Amphiaraus (a seer of Greek mythology). Virgil explains that because Amphiaraus tried to see too far ahead, he now can only see behind him. He then points out Tiresias, another famous mythological seer, as well as Manto, a female seer who settled in Mantua, in northern Italy (Virgil's birthplace). After she died, people gathered and built a city around her burial place, naming the city Mantua after her.

Virgil points out to Dante three famous seers of classical myth. As an illustration of God's divine justice, their punishment fits their sin. For trying to see too far ahead, they can now only see behind them. Their punishment thus matches and completes their sin.


Virgil insists that this is the true story of the origins of Mantua, and that other versions of its foundation are false. Dante assures Virgil that he believes him entirely. Virgil points out more seers and witches in this part of hell, before telling Dante that it is time to move on, because the moon is beginning to set.

Virgil insists upon the truth of his speech and Dante readily believes his trustworthy guide.

CANTO 21

The fifth trench is filled with boiling pitch and Dante cannot see anything in the pitch, which is continually bubbling. Suddenly, Virgil tells him to look out and pulls him to his side. Dante turns to see a devil running along, carrying a sinner on his shoulders. The devil tosses the sinner into the pitch, saying that the sinner will join other barrators there. (Barrators are those who exchange public office for money.) Other demons prod the sinner down under the pitch with their hooks and prongs, like cooks prodding meat into a stew.

The demons are terrifying creatures who seem to take delight in causing sinners pain. However, as understood within Dante's framework of divine justice, even these evil demons are paradoxically made to carry out the will of God, enforcing his divine justice through punishment.

Virgil tells Dante to hide behind a rock while he talks with these devils. When the devils see Virgil approach, they rush at him with their weapons, but Virgil tells them to halt. The leader of these demons, Malacoda comes to speak with Virgil. Virgil tells him that he is on a journey ordained by God's will. Frustrated, Malacoda relents and tells his fellow demons not to harm Virgil, who then calls for Dante to come out of hiding.

Virgil uses his powerful speech to deal with the hostile demons. In contrast to the evil creatures of hell who threaten and use physical violence, Virgil and other agents of God rely only on the power of words.

Dante hurries to Virgil's side. A few of the devils debate poking and stabbing at Dante for fun, anyways, but Malacoda reprimands them. He explains to Virgil and Dante that the bridge over the inner trenches was destroyed back when Jesus entered hell and so they will have to walk around to another place where they can proceed further toward the center of the eighth circle. He sends a group of demons to guide them.

While the devils are still mischievous and malevolent, Virgil's words have brought them sufficiently under control so that they will help Dante and Virgil. (However, Malacoda is not being entirely forthright and helpful here; at the end of canto 23, Virgil realizes that the devils were not telling the truth about the bridge being impassible.)

Dante is terrified and begs for Virgil to guide him alone, without the dubious company of demons. Virgil, though, reassures Dante that they will be fine, and the two poets take off with the group of demons.

Still susceptible to fear, Dante does not yet have complete confidence in his divinely appointed guide. Virgil's words again have a reassuring effect on Dante.

CANTO 22

Dante says that, although he has seen horsemen and soldiers and other military crowds advancing and marching, he has never seen as strange a sight as the troop of devils marching along with Virgil and him. While walking, Dante looks into the pitch, where he occasionally sees sinners try to come to the surface and get some part of their body out of the boiling liquid. Others cower in the shallows of the pitch. But when a devil comes near, they jump back in out of fear.

The procession of devils is stranger than anything Dante has experienced on earth, emphasizing hell's radical difference from the world of the living.

One of the demons hooks a sinner by his hair and pulls him out of the pitch. While the devils gleefully consider flaying him, Dante asks Virgil if he can possibly know who this is. Virgil asks the sinner where he is from and he answers that he is from Navarre. He begins to tell about his life, but is interrupted by the devils prodding and stabbing him. While the devils squabble over who will do the torturing, the sinner asks Virgil if he has any more questions.

The sinner's punishment is a part of God's justice, but the way in which the demons delight in torturing him is still frightening. The sinner never tells Dante and Virgil his name but is eager to talk with these two souls while he still has the ability to.

Virgil asks if he knows of any Italians in the pitch. The sinner says that he was recently next to one, but as he continues his reply demons rip his body apart. While the soul looks upon his own mangled body, Virgil asks him who this body belonged to, and the soul answers that it was Fra Gomita and begins to point out others in the pitch. He tells Virgil that he could name many more and call up seven Italians, if the devils would not flay and torture him.

Virgil and Dante are mainly concerned with finding other Italians in hell. Their journey is cosmic and grand in scope, but their focus often seems provincial and local.

The demons are skeptical of the sinner's attempt to escape their punishment. And indeed, while they are distracted, he escapes their notice and dives into the pitch in what Dante calls "a merry prank," (22.118). The angry demons try to pursue him, but he has already gone down deep into the pitch where they cannot see him. The demons are frustrated and blame each other for their mistake. One of them attacks another, and the two of them accidentally fall into the pitch, where they are stuck. Virgil and Dante leave the band of devils behind.

The sinner's "merry prank" is a rare instance of comic relief amongst the suffering of hell. While he escapes the torture of the devils, he does not escape the punishment he has earned in hell, as he dives back into the boiling pitch.

CANTO 23

As Virgil and Dante walk on, Dante worries that the devils will get angry and come after the two of them. Virgil agrees and suggests that the two of them descend into the next trench so the demons won't find them. Just then, Dante sees the demons starting after them. Virgil snatches Dante up like a mother holding her child and the pair descend quickly down the ridge into the next trench to escape the devils. Once they set foot there, they are safe, since the demons are confined by God to the fifth trench.

Even Virgil's powerful words cannot hold the hostile demons at bay for long. Still, the malevolent devils are unable to leave their specific trench. They are instruments of God's plan of justice, firmly under his control—they are as much trapped in the fifth trench as the sinners.


In this sixth trench, Dante sees souls walking around slowly, covered in cloaks. The cloaks are bright and gilded on the outside, but lined with heavy lead that weighs the souls down. Dante asks Virgil to see if he can find any famous sinner amongst them. Two souls overhear Dante speaking Italian and call out to them. Seeing that Dante is alive, they ask who he is and what he is doing here where the hypocrites are punished. Dante confirms that he is still living and asks who they are.

The hypocrites' punishment is fitting for their false nature. In life, they used lies to ease their way. In hell, their cloaks appear gilded and bright on the outside—just as their lies were pretty—but the cloaks weigh them down instead of allowing them to slip through life.

The souls say that they were two Jovial Friars named Catalano and Loderingo and as Dante begins asking another question, he is stopped mid-sentence when he notices a man crucified upon the ground. Catalano tells Dante that this is the man who came up with the idea to crucify Jesus: Caiaphas. He says that all souls who pass by must walk over him.

The "Jovial Friars" offer another dig at those in the Church who abuse their position to gain wealth—the friars were supposed to follow vows of poverty. Caiaphas' punishment is directly related to his sin: for causing the crucifixion of Jesus, he is now crucified. And for causing one man to die for the sins of all, he must now bear the weight of all who walk over him.


Virgil asks the friars how he and Dante might get out of this trench and Catalano tells him that there is a rock nearby over which they can climb to get up out of the deep trench. From there, the bridge over the trenches is broken, but the rubble is stable enough to cross over. Virgil realizes that the devils earlier lied when they said they couldn't take the bridge. Virgil takes off, looking angry, and Dante follows him.

Virgil now realizes that Malacoda and his devils lied to him about the bridge, which was still usable. Evidently, the devils were not entirely under the spell of Virgil's words.

CANTO 24

Dante is distressed to see Virgil upset, but when they get to the rocks by which they can climb up to the next bridge Virgil has his familiar, confident smile back. Virgil helps hoist Dante up as they climb up the rocks. The climb is difficult and when they finally reach the top, Dante sits to rest, as he is exhausted. Virgil scolds him for his sloth, saying that resting is not the way to attain fame. Fame, Virgil says, is the only memorial of someone on earth after he or she dies.

Virgil's continual scolding of Dante is part of his educating and guiding Dante through his physical and spiritual journey. Not only does Virgil encourage him to become a more pious soul, but he also tells Dante to seek fame by making this great journey (and telling the tale in his poem).

Dante gets back up, catches his breath, and tells Virgil to lead on. As they cross the bridge, Dante hears unintelligible voices from below but cannot see into the **dark** where they are coming from. He asks Virgil if they can go down after crossing to see these souls.

The voices of the sinners below are a mess of unintelligible noise, as opposed to the eloquent speech of Dante and Virgil.

Virgil assents and when they cross and go down into the trench, Dante sees a mass of strange, frightening serpents and lizards, unlike any earthly creatures. He sees naked men running around, their hands tied behind their backs with snakes, trying to flee the lizards. One of these souls passes close by Dante and is stung by a snake. He instantly burns and crumbles to ash.

The terrifying creatures Dante finds here are unlike any lizards one might find on earth. They are literally other-worldly.

But then the ashes come together again and form the body of the sinner again, like a phoenix emerging from its own ashes. Virgil asks the reconstituted soul who he is and where he is from. He is from Tuscany, and names himself as Vanni Fucci. Dante asks what crime he is guilty of and Vanni looks at him with shame and refuses before admitting that he robbed a church. This part of the eighth circle contains thieves. Vanni then foretells that Dante's favored political party will be defeated in the future.

Vanni is an interesting soul in that he doesn't want fame—he doesn't want to reveal his past or what he did. In this way he reveals the difference between fame, being remembered for something good, and infamy, being remembered for something shameful.

CANTO 25

Vanni curses God and at once a snake curls around his throat. Dante is disgusted with Vanni and wishes that his home city of Pistoia would burn to ashes. Other snakes wrap around Vanni and Dante thinks that he has seen no other spirit as defiant against God. Vanni runs away, and Dante sees a centaur being tortured by snakes and a dragon-like monster that Virgil identifies as Cacus. (Cacus was a mythological monster that dwelled near the site of ancient Rome and was supposedly killed by Hercules.)

Dante is filled with pious anger at Vanni's blasphemy. However, his curse is directed not at Vanni but at Vanni's home city in Italy. Once again there is a tension between grand concerns (blasphemy and evil) and very local ones, as Dante uses Vanni to denigrate the town of Pistoia. Cacus is another classical monster (described in Virgil's own Aeneid) that Dante places in his Christian underworld.

Three spirits come up to Dante and Virgil and ask who the two poets are. One of them calls for someone named Cianfa. Dante tells his readers that they may not believe him, but at that moment a six-legged worm appears and jumps on one of the spirits. The creature clings so tightly to the spirit that they merge into one figure, their bodies melting into each other. The other two spirits cry out for their companion, whom they call Agnello. The strange creature made from the union between Agnello and Cianfa (who was in the form of the six-legged worm) slithers off like a lizard.

This scene of bodily transformation is one of the more otherworldly episodes of Dante's poem.


Another lizard comes up to one of the other two spirits and strikes him in the stomach, but he doesn't react and simply yawns. A kind of smoke is emitted from the lizard's mouth and from the spirit's wounded stomach. The streams of smoke merge and the two change bodies: the lizard turns into a human body while the spirit morphs into a lizard. Dante says that this incredible transformation is more remarkable than anything told by the Roman poets Lucan and Ovid.

Dante takes this opportunity to vaunt his own literary achievement, as he claims to narrate things even more incredible than Lucan or Ovid. Ovid wrote an entire epic poem about bizarre transformations—The Metamorphoses—so this is quite a claim. It also represents Dante's placing his Christian epic above the admirable but pagan epics of his classical predecessors.


Dante describes, detail-by-detail, how the lizard's body transforms into a human's, and vice versa. The spirit that is now a lizard leaves, hissing, and the spirit who was just a lizard chases it, calling the lizard Buoso. The third spirit runs off, as well, and Dante recognizes him by his limp: he is Puccio Sciancato, a Florentine thief.

These bizarre transformations can be made sense of as a just punishment for thieves. They stole other people's property and now are themselves victims of theft, as others rob them of their most intimate possession: their bodies.

CANTO 26

Dante ironically praises Florence, because its fame spreads throughout not only earth, but hell as well. He says that he saw five Florentines among the thieves and is ashamed for his city. Virgil leads Dante back up to the bridge, so that they can head for the next trench.

By mentioning the Florentines he saw in this part of hell, Dante voices his disdain for those in power in Florence—men who in his estimation had stolen Florence, and who had exiled him from his native city.

Dante and Virgil take the dangerous climb up some rocks and Dante can see the eighth trench **lit** up by many small, twinkling fires. Dante compares the small, moving fires to fireflies and then to Elijah's flaming chariot that rose to heaven. Virgil tells him that under each flame is a tortured soul.

Dante compares this amazing sight to both Biblical and more everyday imagery, trying to find some way to express its strangeness.

Dante sees a flame split in two and asks who is under that flame. Virgil tells him that it is Ulysses and Diomedes. In Homer's *Iliad* these two heroes fought together in the Trojan War and stole the city's palladium (a sacred religious object). They also both participated in the trickery of the Trojan horse. They now pay for their deceit here.

Dante's incorporation of these two heroes from the Trojan War into his story is also an incorporation of the two most important epics in the western tradition: Homer's Iliad (in which Ulysses and Diomedes are prominent) and Odyssey (which centers around Ulysses). By including them in his poem, Dante elevates himself to the level of the great poet Homer—perhaps even above it. Further, by incorporating these two heroes into hell he asserts the preeminence of God's moral order over the morality of the ancient Greeks.

Dante eagerly asks Virgil if he can speak to the two heroes. Virgil agrees that this would be good, but tells Dante to let him talk to them. Virgil addresses the dual flame and asks one of them to describe his final voyage. Ulysses answers and the flame flickers like a speaking tongue, giving forth a voice.

Virgil's eloquent speech compels Ulysses to tell his story.

Ulysses says that when he returned home from his long voyage from Troy, after being detained by the witch Circe, he still had an urge to travel and explore. This urge trumped any love he felt for his father, son, or wife, from whom he had been separated for twenty years, so he set out on another voyage to explore the world. Ulysses and his crew sailed past Spain, past the Pillars of Hercules (between Spain and Morocco), into the open Atlantic.

While nothing more than a flame, Ulysses still retains the power of his voice. This is important both because it allows him to include his story in Dante's narrative and because Ulysses is best known in Homeric epic for his clever, persuasive way with words.

Ulysses told his men that they would explore the world beyond the sun (the Western end of the Mediterranean was thought to be the end of the world at this point, long before Europeans discovered the Americas). Ulysses inspired his men with a powerful speech encouraging them to strive after knowledge and they sailed on until they found a huge mountain. But then a whirlwind came and sunk their ship, and Ulysses and his men drowned.

In order to incorporate the pagan Ulysses into his Christian poem, Dante turns Homer's great hero into a sinner. Ulysses' heroic ambition becomes sinful arrogance, as he seeks here to surpass the bounds of human experience and travel to the ends of the earth. But note that where Ulysses fails, Dante succeeds. He is able to travel beyond the limits of the earthly world while still living. Dante in some sense thus makes himself an even greater hero than the famous Ulysses.

CANTO 27

Ulysses leaves and another flame draws near, making strange muffled noises that Dante likens to the noises coming from a Sicilian bull: a torture device that is a brass bull within which someone place, with a fire underneath, until they are roasted alive and their screams, as they emerge from the bull's mouth, become unintelligible and sound like a bull's roaring.

Dante's strange simile between the soul and a torture victim draws a parallel between our world and the underworld. It also conveys the extreme suffering of the soul that he talks to. Despite this, the soul is able to form articulate speech.

The spirit begs Dante and Virgil to speak with him. He asks about Romagna, a region of Italy. Virgil encourages Dante to talk to this spirit, who is clearly Italian. Dante tells the spirit that Romagna never has absolute peace and stability but that when he left the region last there was no open strife there. He gives news of individual cities, and then asks the spirit his name, so that his name can live on, on earth.

Dante offers to carry on the sinner's name on earth, in exchange for their conversation. Even in the depths of hell, the sinner's main concern is his homeland back on earth.

The spirit says that Dante will never carry his name to earth, since no one can escape from hell, and so he tells Dante about his life. (From his life story, he is identifiable as Guido da Montefeltro, though he doesn't state his name.) He says that he was a cunning and deceitful soldier, a Ghibelline, who realized that his deceit was wicked, had a religious conversion, and then became a Franciscan friar. But Pope Boniface VIII sought him out as a military adviser in his battles against the Ghibelline.

Guido is unaware of Dante's ability to travel through both earth and the afterlife. He doesn't realize that Dante actually can ensure that his name will live on, and seems only willing to share his story because *he thinks it won't get shared.*

Guido was hesitant to help, but Pope Boniface promised to absolve him of his sins ahead of time if he would help him destroy his enemies. Guido accepted the absolution, then, thinking himself protected, advised the pope with false counsel and the pope's attack on the Ghibelline's failed. When he died, St. Francis came to save him, but a devil took him to hell instead based on the argument that a man can't be absolved for a sin before he commits it, because one can only be absolved if one is repentant and one can only be repentant if one has sinned first. Once brought to hell, Minos sent Guido here to the eighth circle of hell, for his fraudulence and deceit. Having told his story, Guido leaves, lamenting his fate. Dante and Virgil go onward toward the ninth trench of this circle of hell.

The Church was in the practice of selling things like indulgences or otherwise granting pre-emptive absolution. Here Dante makes a logical argument—based on Aristotelian principles—that one cannot be granted absolution beforehand because if one is absolved and then sins, then by definition that person still intends to sin even as he is being absolved, and one can only be absolved if one is repenting the sin. By making such an argument Dante thereby asserts that reason and logic must inform moral choices and that Church authority, while sacred, can't operate without logic. Indeed, all of hell is profoundly logical, furthering Dante's argument that there is a logic to Christian spiritual thought and practice that can't be overruled, even by a pope.

CANTO 28

As Dante looks down from the bridge into the ninth trench, he claims that no one could hope to relate in words all the suffering he saw there. He compares the number of bleeding limbs and wounded bodies to the sum of all casualties from some of the world's greatest wars. Dante describes one body split down the middle so that its insides are completely visible. This tortured soul pulls open his own chest and cries out to Dante, identifying himself as Mohammed. He points out another soul, Ali (who instigated a great schism in Islam), whose face is split down the middle.

Dante again worries that he cannot express his story adequately through language. This worry does more to emphasize how incredible his journey was than express any real lack of self-confidence in his talent as a poet. Dante's inclusion of Mohammed allows him to incorporate another religious tradition (that of Islam) into his all-encompassing Christian epic, and to privilege Christianity above that "competitive" religion.

Mohammed tells Dante that the souls here were all sowers of scandal and discord. Since they "split" people by causing schisms and discord, they are now literally split here: a devil with a sword cuts the souls open. Their wounds heal, but then the devil splits them open again. Mohammed then asks who Dante is.

These sinners' punishment of being literally split apart corresponds very specifically to their sin of spreading social discord.

Virgil explains that Dante is not dead and is not being punished here, but is journeying through hell, guided by him. The suffering souls all stand amazed for a moment, so stunned that they forget their pain momentarily. Mohammed asks Dante to relay some advice to someone named Fra Dolcino on earth.

All the suffering souls are stunned at Dante's presence in hell as a living soul. In a place with no break from suffering, it is extremely remarkable that they are so astonished they forget their pain, if only for a brief moment.

Mohammed then walks off, and another spirit comes up to Dante with his ear and nose cut off and a wound in his throat. He asks Dante to remember him, Pier da Medicina, on earth and asks him to relay a warning to two other Italians about their impending deaths at sea.

Pier da Medicina is still concerned about those on earth. He asks Dante to remember him so that he can live on in some form through his name, preserved in Dante's poem.


Dante asks Pier da Medicina to identify another suffering soul, and he points out one whose mouth has been cut open so that he cannot speak. This now voiceless soul is Curio, who spurred on civil strife in ancient Rome. Pier then shows Dante Mosca, who sowed civil discord in Tuscany. Dante tells the man that his deeds brought death upon his family, which makes Mosca flee in misery.

Part of Curio's punishment is the fact that he cannot speak and thus cannot tell his own life story. Dante reacts to Mosca not with pity but with righteous satisfaction at his pain.


Then, Dante sees—and he cautions his reader that he would hesitate to tell this without proof, but his conscience compels him to relate the story—a headless man walking around, holding his own head in his hands. The soul walks over toward Dante and lifts his own head up to talk to Dante. He tells Dante that he is Bertrand de Born, who persuaded a young king to kill his father. Because in turning a son against his father he "sundered those that should be one," (28.139) his body is now severed in two instead of together as one.

Bertrand de Born's amazing punishment, which Dante doubts his poem can convey believably, is darkly suitable to his sin. It thus completes Bertrand's sin, bringing about divine justice.


CANTO 29

Dante continues to look at the sowers of discord in amazement, and Virgil tells him that they must hurry and continue with their journey. There are far too many souls here for Dante to speak with all of them. Dante says that he thinks a family member of his might be here, but Virgil tells him that this person, Geri del Bello, already passed by and Dante didn't notice him.

Even among such wonders and famous souls, Dante's main concern is to find his family member. Local, personal, earthly concerns again take precedence for Dante over seemingly loftier issues—like continuing on his holy journey.

Virgil says that Geri looked angrily at Dante, and Dante says that this must be because no one has avenged Geri's violent death yet. Dante pities Geri. Dante and Virgil walk along until they can see the next trench—except that, as Dante remarks, there is no **light** for it to be seen by. Dante has to cover his ears because the shrieks of pain coming from this tenth and final trench are so loud.

Virgil's description of Geri shows that hell and earth are significantly interrelated. Geri is angry in hell because his death goes unavenged on earth. And if someone were to avenge him on earth, his behavior in hell would change. As they get deeper into hell, the light disappears.

The souls here suffer from horrible diseases and sicknesses, worse than any on earth. Dante and Virgil walk down into the trench and Dante sees that here falsifiers are punished. The souls are heaped on the ground or crawling around, suffering from horrible illnesses. Dante sees two souls sitting, covered in scabs, scratching themselves violently because they suffer from a terrible, unending itch. Dante compares their scratching to someone scraping the scales off a fish with a knife.

Dante's simile about scratching creates a strange likeness between something on earth and something on hell. However, the grotesque correspondence (between a fish being scaled and a human body being scratched) emphasizes the horrible strangeness of hell.

Virgil asks these two if anyone nearby is Italian and tells them that he is leading a living man through hell. The two souls (and others who heard Virgil) draw near in amazement. Virgil encourages Dante to ask them whatever he wants. Dante tells the spirits to identify themselves, so that their names can live on in fame on earth.

Dante's status as an earthly living soul in hell is again a source of marvel. Virgil and Dante are again mostly interested in speaking with sinners from Italy.

One spirit introduces himself as Griffolino d'Arezzo, a scientist who tricked a nobleman of Siena by promising impossible miracles. He is punished here, though, for his pursuit of alchemy (falsifying precious metals). Dante criticizes the people of Siena loudly and another spirit agrees with him. This spirit identifies himself as Capocchio, also guilty of alchemy.

After hearing Griffolino, Dante does not criticize him, or the pursuit of alchemy, or sin. Rather, he uses Griffolino as a chance to insult Griffolino's home city of Siena. Dante's fantastical journey is often used like this as a way of criticizing the cities and people of his own time.

CANTO 30

Dante describes two more shades he saw, whose suffering surpassed even that of Hecuba and Athamas, two figures of Greek mythology. (Hecuba was the queen of Troy who saw her children murdered as the city fell; Athamas went mad, killed his own son, and drove his wife and another son to escape him by suicide.) These two souls run about madly (Dante compares them to wild boars) and one of them bites Capocchio's neck.

Dante's comparisons to tales of Greek mythology suggest that his story is even more marvelous than the classical stories of myth that his Christian epic supplants.

Griffolino says that the one who bit is Gianni Schicchi, who is now rabid and "bites whatever he sees," (30.33). Dante asks him who the other mad spirit is and he identifies it as the spirit of Myrrha, an incestuous woman from Greek mythology.

In Dante's underworld, local Italians from Dante's world suffer alongside famous mythological characters. The story of Myrrha is told by Ovid, so Dante's inclusion of her in his hell is also an inclusion of Ovid's narrative within his cosmic epic.

Dante sees another soul who is bloated and swollen grotesquely. This soul tells Dante to look on his punishment and identifies himself as Adam, a counterfeiter from Brescia in Italy. His punishment is eternal thirst and he constantly dreams of the river Arno near his hometown, but he can never find any water here.

For counterfeiting and thus distorting true money, Adam's own body is now grotesquely distorted. As always in Dante's hell, the punishment fits the crime.

Even more than water, though, Adam says that he desires to find and seek revenge on someone named Guido, who convinced him to practice counterfeiting and is now somewhere in hell. Dante asks Adam to identify a pair of sinners "rolled in a heap," (30.92) and giving off smoke. According to Adam, one of them is Sinon, who tricked the Trojans into letting the Trojan horse into their city. The other is the wife of Potiphar, who falsely accused Joseph in the bible.

Sinon and the wife of Potiphar provide a good image for the combination of biblical, Christian characters and classical figures in Dante's poem. As sinners from both traditions appear in Dante's hell, these two major areas of influence converge in The Inferno, just as these two characters are literally rolled together into one heap.

Hearing his name, Sinon hits Adam on his bloated belly and Adam responds by hitting him on his head. Sinon and Adam trade jibes, arguing over whose deception was worse. Adam says that Sinon's deception was worse, but Sinon says that he only told one lie, whereas Adam forged many coins.

Adam and Sinon foolishly argue over whose deception was worse. But in the end only God can judge this, as he dictates where in hell different kinds of sinners are punished for their particular wrongs.

Dante is enjoying watching these sinners feud, but Virgil rebukes him, telling him that he will "quarrel with thee," (30.122) if he delays their journey any longer to watch this dispute. Dante is instantly ashamed (and says that, looking back, he still feels shame). Virgil notices how ashamed Dante is and tells him it is okay: "Less shame would wash away a greater crime / Than thine has been," (30.142-143) he tells Dante. Still, he says that enjoying such feuding is vulgar, and the two prepare to resume their journey.

While Virgil has taught Dante not to pity the sinners in hell, he is also upset by Dante taking delight in their suffering. Finding entertainment in the suffering of hell would make him not unlike its evil demons. As he gradually learns, Dante ought to regard sinners with some degree of pious indignation, but not with pleasure.

CANTO 31

Relieved that Virgil is not seriously upset with him, Dante follows him forward. Dante can hardly see anything in the **darkness**, but hears a loud horn that makes thunder seem quiet by comparison. Dante thinks that he sees a group of towers ahead and asks Virgil what it is. Virgil tells him that he is seeing falsely in the darkness and that he will see more clearly when they get there.

The darkness of hell is not only representative of sin, but also of uncertainty and deception, as Dante's eyes are tricked by the absence of light, which promises clarity and knowledge in the world above.

Virgil tells Dante that what he sees are not towers, but actually giants stuck from their navels down into the ground. As they approach the giants, Dante indeed sees their shapes more clearly. The giants are arranged in a circle surrounding a well. Dante looks in wonder at their enormous size.

Dante is astounded at the otherworldly sight of these giants, whom he mistook for huge towers.

One of the giants tries to speak, but no intelligible words come. Virgil tells the giant not to try to speak, but to stick to its horn, which hangs around its neck (and which Dante heard just earlier). Virgil identifies this giant as Nimrod, who was responsible for the construction of the failed tower of Babel. (In a biblical story, the tower of Babel was supposed to reach to heaven. When the overreaching tower crumbled and was destroyed by God, the one language that all humans spoke fractured into all the different languages we now have.)

Nimrod's punishment is fitting for his having caused the fracture of language into the many different languages of earth. As he robbed earth of a language intelligible by all, he now speaks gibberish comprehensible to no one.

Dante then sees an even taller giant, with its hands bound by a huge iron chain. Virgil names him as Ephialtes, who in classical mythology tried to climb to the top of Olympus to overthrow Jupiter. Ephialtes shakes in his chains, causing the ground to tremble. Virgil tells Dante that they will find Antaeus, a giant who is unchained and can carry them down the well surrounded by these giants.

Dante mixes the Biblical character Nimrod with the giants of Greek mythology, making them into the same kind of creature. Ephialtes' affront to Jupiter becomes, for Dante, an offense against God.

Virgil addresses the fearful giant Antaeus and tells him to carry Dante and him safely down the well, since Dante, who is alive, can report his name back on earth, guaranteeing him fame. Antaeus outstretches a hand, and Dante and Virgil climb onto it. Dante is scared to travel this way, but Antaeus reaches down and safely deposits the two poets in the ninth circle of hell, where Judas and Lucifer are held.

Virgil's powerful words turn this terrifying giant into a helpful aid for Dante's journey to the center of hell, where the worst of the sinners are held: the betrayers, including the two most awful betrayers, the betrayers of Jesus and God.

CANTO 32

Dante hesitates as to whether his words can even come close to conveying the hideous innermost region of hell. He asks the muses to help his poem stay close to the truth. As Antaeus drops Dante and Virgil on the ground, he hears a voice telling them to be careful not to tread on sinners' heads. As Dante looks around, he notices that they are standing on a frozen lake in which sinners are submerged with only their heads sticking out of the ice.

Dante once again questions language's ability to convey the truth of his experience. When he asks the muses for help, he is following a classical pattern. However, he alters the pagan deities of the arts (the muses) to heavenly, Christian muses.


Close to his feet Dante sees two souls whose hair is tangled together and who continually butt heads. He asks them who they are and they start to cry but their tears freeze immediately. Another soul, whose ears have frozen off, shouts at Dante, asking why he is staring at them. He names the other two spirits as two brothers who killed each other. (Their names are not given, but they are Napoleone and Alessandro of Mangona.)

Napoleone and Alessandro disrespected their close bond of brotherhood in life and are now fittingly doomed to be frozen together with each other for all eternity.

The spirit says that no other souls deserve as much as these two to be frozen together and tells Dante that he is Camicion dei Pazzi (who murdered a family member). Dante sees thousands more frightening faces sticking out of the ice, as he and Virgil walk toward the center of the lake, leaving behind those who betrayed their families and approaching the region populated by traitors to their countries.

Camicion recognizes the justice of Napoleone and Alessandro's punishment. Dante sees many more souls than he can hope to record in his poem. The epic truth of his journey is again greater than can be expressed in his poem.


As they walk, Dante accidentally steps on a head. The spirit cries out and Dante thinks he recognizes it. He asks Virgil if they can stop for a moment. The soul hurls insults at Dante, and Dante asks who he is to be shouting such insults here. The spirit angrily asks who Dante is to be treading on people's heads here. Dante answers that he is living and can give the spirit's name fame by including it in his writing. But the spirit tells Dante he wants no fame and shoos him away.

Dante recognizes his own powerful ability to grant fame through writing the story of his journey. This soul, however, does not want to be famous for being a suffering sinner in hell.

Dante grabs the soul's hair and threatens to rip the hair from his head unless he identifies himself. The spirit is not intimidated and Dante is pulling at the hair when another spirit calls out, asking why Bocca degli Abati (the spirit who is refusing to say his own name) is shouting. Dante recognizes Bocca as a traitor to Florence and promises to make his name live on in infamy for his misdeeds.

Far from pity, Dante here displays righteous anger at Bocca. He promises to use his ability to grant fame to make Bocca infamous for his betrayal of Dante's native city (Bocca betrayed the Florentine Guelphs during battle). Dante seems almost angrier because Bocca sinned against Florence rather than against God.

Bocca tells Dante to write whatever he wishes, but tells Dante to include mention of other souls nearby. He names several other sinners. Dante leaves Bocca behind and soon sees two men frozen together with one eating the other's head. Dante asks this spirit who he is, saying that if his rage against the other spirit is justified, he will tell his story on earth, giving him a favorable reputation.

After showing anger toward Bocca, Dante offers the possibility of pity to this other spirit, but only if it has a justified cause for its anger against the other soul. Dante is now repeatedly invoking his ability to make sinners famous.

CANTO 33

The sinner just addressed by Dante stops eating the head for a moment (wiping his mouth grotesquely on the other spirit's hair) to talk to him. The spirit recognizes that Dante is from Florence and agrees to tell his story. He is Count Ugolino from Pisa and he is eating the head of Archbishop Ruggieri, who imprisoned him along with his sons in a tower, where they starved.

For starving Ugolino, Ruggieri is now forever the victim of Ugolino's appetite.

Ugolino tells Dante that he is cruel if he does not weep at his story. One morning in the tower where he was starved to death, Ugolino began gnawing at his own hands and his sons told him to eat them instead, willingly sacrificing their own bodies. Ugolino stopped biting his hands, seeing how it troubled his sons. Over time, his sons died one by one and then Ugolino says ambiguously that "famine did what sorrow could not do," (33.75). After telling his story, Ugolino sinks his teeth into the Archbishop's head again.

Ugolinio implores Dante to pity him, and perhaps he would have at the beginning of his journey. But by now he has learned to moderate his response to the suffering souls of sinners. Ugolino's final line is ambiguous: did famine kill him, which his painful sorrow could not do? Or did famine compel him to eat his own children?

Dante cries out against Pisa. Although Ugolino betrayed Pisa in its disputes with other Italian cities, his children did not deserve to be punished along with him. Dante and Virgil leave Ugolino behind and Dante sees some tortured souls lying on their backs in the ice, unable to weep because their tears freeze over their faces.

Dante again uses an individual sinner's story as an opportunity to criticize an Italian town. He has come a long way from the man who fainted from pity at Francesca da Rimini's story, as he coolly moves on from Ugolino.


Dante feels a wind and asks Virgil what is causing it. Virgil tells him that he will see for himself soon enough. One suffering soul begs Dante to pull the layer of frozen tears from his face, so that he can cry once more (even though these tears will again freeze over his face). Dante agrees to on the condition that the spirit tells him his name.

This soul begs for some form of pity from Dante and Dante seems willing to grant it (but see below). Having recognized his power as a poet to grant fame, Dante uses it to bargain with this sinner.


The spirit identifies himself as Friar Alberigo, who killed his own brother after inviting him to a dinner. Dante asks if Alberigo is already dead and Alberigo says he isn't, but that this region of hell called Ptolomaea (reserved for those who betray guests) can hold souls even before they have died. The bodies of these people, bereft of their souls, are then possessed by demons on earth. He points out another suffering soul to Dante: Branca d'Oria, who Dante knows to be alive.

Alberigo and Branca are chilling examples of the connectedness of earth and hell. Their bodies walk on earth, controlled by hellish demons, while their souls dwell in hell. They also offer Dante an opportunity to slander a contemporary, by writing that Branca's soul is actually already in hell.

Branca had invited his father-in-law to a banquet and killed him there. Dante is incredulous that Branca's soul could come here even before he dies. Alberigo answers that Branca's soul came here as soon as he committed the murder, arriving even before the murdered father-in-law found his own place in hell. Alberigo asks Dante to release the ice from his eyes now, but Dante refuses. Dante laments Genoa, where Branca was from, as a horrible place where one of its citizens walks around with his soul already in hell.

Dante's behavior toward Branca may seem cruel, as he denies him the help he promised, but from Dante's perspective it is justified behavior toward a sinner against God. As with earlier sinners, Branca offers Dante a chance to criticize another local Italian city.


CANTO 34

Virgil informs Dante that they are now approaching Lucifer, once the fairest of angels before he rebelled against God. As they walk along, Dante sees souls whose entire bodies are frozen within the ice he and Virgil walk upon. The two poets come to where Lucifer is and Virgil shows him to Dante. Dante says that he cannot express in words how terrible the sight was and that he felt neither death nor life in this deepest part of hell.

Lucifer represents the epitome of sin, a direct contradiction of God's will. If Dante was worried that words would fail him before, he is certainly doubtful of their ability to convey the sheer terror of seeing the most evil sinner in all of hell.


Lucifer's upper body sticks out of the ice and Dante says that Lucifer is even larger than the giants he saw earlier. In fact, Dante is closer to the giant's size than the giants are to Lucifer's. Dante describes Lucifer's head as having three faces joined together. The middle is bright red, while the one on the right is a yellowish color and the one on the left is dark.

Lucifer's three faces are a sinful (if fitting) perversion of the Holy Trinity (the father, the son, and the holy ghost). Both the epitome of good and of sin are Trinitarian entities (beings that are somehow both one and three entities at once).

Lucifer has wings larger than any ship's sails that Dante has ever seen. The flapping of these wings causes the gusts of wind that Dante felt before. Tears and blood drip down his three faces, while each mouth chews upon a different sinner. In the middle mouth is Judas, who betrayed Jesus. The other two mouths consume Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Julius Caesar.

At the core of hell, Dante places not only arguably the worst sinner in the biblical tradition (Judas) but also two figures of ancient Roman history, who infamously betrayed not Jesus or God, but the Roman hero and almost-emperor Julius Caesar. Judas is the worst sinner, as he betrayed God. Dante seems to suggest that Brutus and Cassius follow just slightly after because they killed the greatest example of secular power the world has known, Julius Caesar, who ruled Rome (the center of Italy) when the Roman Empire (which Dante revered) was at its height.

Virgil tells Dante that they have now seen all of hell. They wait until an opportune time and then climb up onto Lucifer's monstrous body. Dante holds tight to Virgil as they make the perilous climb up Satan's body. At last, they reach the height of an outcropping of rock where they can rest. Dante looks out from it, expecting to see Lucifer's head, but sees his legs stretching up before him, as if everything is upside down.

The reversal of what Dante expects to see during his short break from climbing up Lucifer emphasizes the bizarre strangeness of his unbelievable, otherworldly journey. Having learned all he was to learn from hell, Dante is now ready to proceed to purgatory.

Virgil tells Dante to get on his feet again, because they must continue their journey, even though the road is difficult. Dante asks why things seem to have turned upside down and Virgil explains that they have passed beyond the center of the earth to the southern hemisphere. After climbing up to Lucifer's head, Virgil had to climb back down the other side of him to go back toward the earth's surface. Virgil tells Dante that the southern hemisphere is entirely ocean now, because when Lucifer fell from heaven, he fell through this part of earth and the land fled from him.

Virgil's geography lesson situates the strange world of hell precisely in relation to the earth. Hell seems entirely different from and other than earth, yet Dante locates it under the earth's surface. The two worlds are thus part of the same planet. For Dante, this life and the next are radically different but also crucially connected.

Dante describes a cavern as far from Lucifer through the earth as Lucifer is from the earth's surface where Dante started (in other words, it is near the earth's surface exactly opposite from where Dante started). Here, a small stream trickles and by following that stream (the beginnings of the river Lethe), Dante says that Virgil led him out of hell. At long last, Dante crawled out of hell through a hole, onto the island where Mt. Purgatory is located. Dante can look up and once again see the **bright stars** in the sky, which he hasn't seen since entering hell.

Dante's version of the river Lethe from classical mythology guides Virgil and him out of hell. Virgil has completed the first stage of his miraculous journey and now re-enters the earthly world. His exit from the world of suffering and sin is signaled by the bright light of the stars in the sky that he can finally see again: he has emerged again into clarity and the light of God's love.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Fredericksen, Erik. "*Inferno*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 20 Nov 2013. Web. 29 Dec 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Fredericksen, Erik. "*Inferno*." LitCharts LLC, November 20, 2013. Retrieved December 29, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/inferno.

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Alighieri, Dante. Inferno. Penguin Classics. 1950.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Alighieri, Dante. Inferno. New York: Penguin Classics. 1950.