



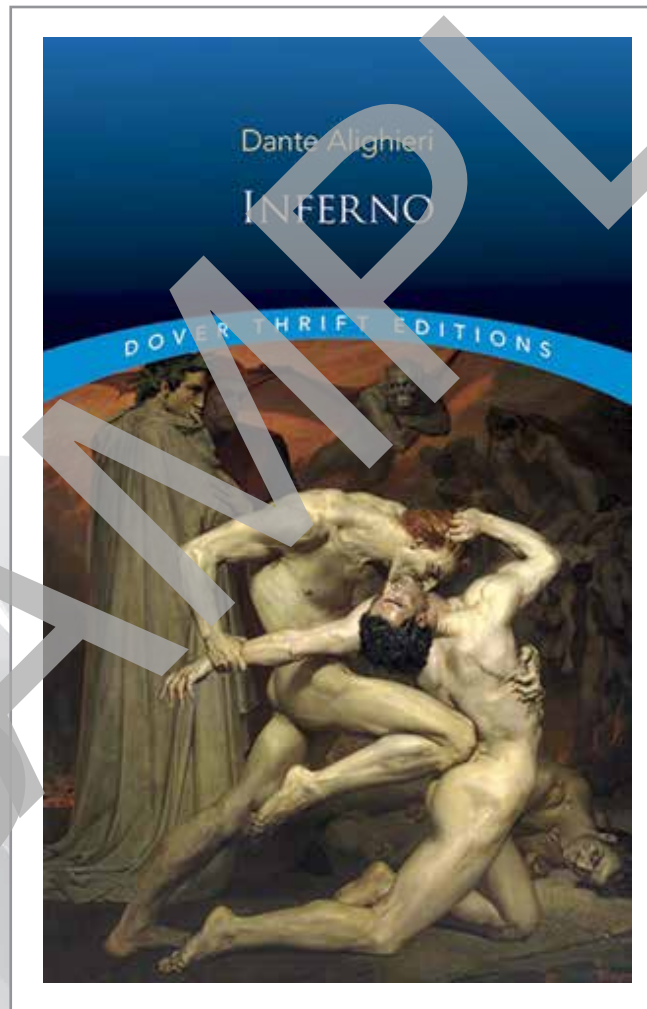
**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# The Inferno

Dante Alighieri



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# The Inferno

Dante Alighieri

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Comparing, evaluating,  
analyzing details

### Writing

Ads, directions

### Listening/Speaking

Participation in discussions,  
participation in dramatic  
activities, describing,  
defending opinions

### Comprehension

Predicting, sequencing,  
story mapping, cause/effect,  
inference, problem solving

### Vocabulary

Compound words, words in  
context

### Literary Elements

Character analysis, setting,  
plot, figurative language

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## General Information

**Genre:** Poetry (Epic poem)

**Date:** Written 1307 and 1314

**Setting:** Divisions of Hell

**Point of View:** First-person

**Themes:** God's divine judgment; a soul's journey

**Conflict:** man against himself; man against God's judgment; souls against demons

### Summary

Dante, at the midpoint of his life, is astray in a dark wood and finds himself at the brink of Hell. The famed poet Virgil approaches and offers to guide Dante on a journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. *Inferno* tells of their journey through the Nine Circles of Hell, where sinners of different types endure varying degrees of punishment. In addition to sinners from different historical periods and religious circles, Dante and Virgil encounter many of Dante's own political rivals.

*Inferno* is the first part of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* complete the trilogy. Although Dante's trip begins in Hell, it ends in Heaven. Therefore, *Divine Comedy* fits the classical meaning of comedy: a story with a sad beginning and a happy ending.

**Structure:** All three sections of *Divine Comedy* are written in thirty-three cantos, for a total of ninety-nine. The first canto of *Inferno* serves as an introduction for the entire *Comedy*, making one hundred\* cantos in the entire work. Dante wrote the entire *Comedy* in terza rima, a verse form with three-line tercets (stanzas). Hell is divided into three divisions separated into Nine Circles. The Ante-Hell section serves as the vestibule, making ten\* divisions in all. The souls in Hell are punished according to three particular vices: incontinence, violence, and fraud. Souls in each of the nine regions suffer for a specific sin. Severity of punishment is based on the particular sin, with the lightest at the outer rim and the most severe closer to the center ring. Note the importance of the number three, which is a symbol of the Holy Trinity, and its multiples.

\*The number ten was viewed as the number of perfection.

### About the Author

#### Personal Information

Dante was born in Florence, Italy, sometime between May 14 and June 13, 1265, to Alighiero and Donna Bella (Gabiella) Alighieri. His education was apparently typical of youth of that day, with studies in classical and religious subjects. He was a self-teacher and benefited from studying the works of Ser Brunetto Latini (see Canto XV, 30-124). He was betrothed as a youth to Gemma Donati around 1277 and married her in 1285. They had at least three children: Jacopo, Pietro, and Antonia.

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## Canto II, pp. 12-19

Dante asks Virgil if he considers him worthy to make the journey. Virgil tells Dante that he has been sent by the Virgin Mary to assist him on his journey.

### Vocabulary

empyrean (13, 20)      papal (13, 27)      prudent (17, 82)      innocuous (17, 90)

### Characters

Beatrice (15, 53)

Virgin Mary, “gentle lady” (17, 94): She tells Virgil, through Beatrice, to guide Dante through Hell because of her concern for his soul.

St. Lucia (17, 97): messenger sent by Virgin Mary to Beatrice

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the invocation to the Muses and why Dante does not pray to Christian deities. (13, 7-9, *In Dante’s prayer to the Muses, he includes a request for help from genius and memory to guide him with excellence. They are about to enter Hell; therefore, he would not ask for Christian help. Note that it is an epic tradition to include a prayer to the Muses or other mythological deities.*)
2. Discuss the three women and their roles. (*Beatrice [15-17; 52-54, 70-72]: comes from Heaven to Limbo Circle of Hell to ask for Virgil’s help; prompted by love and the desire to help Dante find his way. Virgin Mary or “gentle lady” [17, 94-96]: weeps in distress for the lost Dante. St. Lucia [17, 97]: sent by Virgin Mary; speaks to Beatrice and instructs her to find Dante and rescue him from eternal damnation; prompts Beatrice to ask for Virgil’s help. Note lines 124-125 on page 9: Three blessed women in Heaven are concerned for Dante.*)

### Supplementary Activities

1. Analyze the reference to a Chosen Vessel (13, 28): apparently St. Paul, based on Acts 9:15 and 2 Corinthians 12:2-4.
2. Analyze the importance of love: powerful enough to drive Beatrice from Heaven seeking help for Dante.
3. Note the **simile**: (19, 127-130) Dante gains new strength as flowers when sun strikes them.

## Canto III, pp. 20-27

Dante and Virgil reach the Gate of Hell. In the vestibule (Ante-Hell), they see the uncommitted, cowardly souls. The ferryman, Charon, is transporting souls across the river into Hell.

### Vocabulary

artificer (21, 4)      lamentations (21, 22)      turbid (21, 29)      abject (23, 47)  
melancholy (25, 77)      execrated (25, 103)      celestial (27, 125)

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## Characters

Pope Celestine V, "he who made great refusal" (23, 59-60): resigned as pope after only 5 months, enabling Boniface VIII to become pope

Charon (25, 94): pagan from mythology; ferryman across the Acheron River in Hell

## Discussion Questions

1. Describe the inscription above the Gate of Hell. Discuss Dante's reaction to Hell and the first souls he encounters. (21; 1-8, 22-25, Responses will vary but should note especially the last line, "Abandon every hope, who enter here." Dante realizes that God created Hell and that there is no hope once a soul enters; he weeps.)
2. Discuss Charon, his role, and his reaction to Dante. (25; 82-84, 94-99, He is the cruel ferryman who transports souls across the Acheron River [River of Sorrows] into Hell. He tells Dante he can't cross there because he is not dead. Charon becomes angry when Virgil assures him that God has willed them to be there.)
3. Note the reference to the coward's great refusal (23, 59-60). This is probably Pope Celestine V, who resigned as pope after only 5 months, allowing Boniface VIII to become pope. Dante held Boniface responsible for his exile.

## Supplementary Activities

1. Read aloud the inscription above the Gate of Hell (21, 1-8).
2. Note the **similes**: (21, 28-30) tumult that will whirl forever like sand; (27, 115-117) evil seed of Adam descended as a falcon when called.
3. Begin a classroom chart of levels of punishment (souls, type). Beginning level: cowardly, lukewarm; insects sting repeatedly (23; 34-39, 64-69). Continue the chart throughout reading.

## Canto IV, pp. 30-39

The travelers enter the First Circle, Limbo, where they see the souls who lived before Christianity or those who died without baptism. They are greeted by Homer and other notable figures.

## Vocabulary

abyss (31, 8)      vanquishes (33, 48)      covert (33, 51)

## Characters

Homer (35, 88): Blind Greek epic poet, author of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

Horace (35, 89): one of the most well-known and respected Latin poets

Lucan (35, 90): Roman poet who conspired against Nero and killed himself after plot was discovered

Note list of characters, including Socrates and Plato (37, 121-143)