

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Inferno

by Dante Alighieri

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The Inferno

Notes

The *Divine Comedy* was completed sometime between 1319 and 1321, the year Dante Alighieri died. It is the story of Dante's journey through Hell and Purgatory to Heaven, or the progression from sin and error to repentance, enlightenment, and redemption.

The massive poem is divided into three parts, called canticles: *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. The number three, of course, symbolizes the Trinity. Each canticle is divided into thirty-three Cantos; the addition of the prefatory Canto of *The Inferno* makes for a total of one hundred, a symbolically "perfect" number. The meter of the poem, *terza rima*, is also symbolic of the Trinity. The poem was written in Tuscan dialect rather than Latin or Greek, and helped spur the rise of the *vernacular* in Europe.

The Inferno, the first of the three canticles, begins in the "dark wood" of Dante's spiritual confusion on Good Friday, follows the poet through Hell, and ends at the foot of the Mountain of Purgatory just before dawn on Easter Sunday. Virgil (70 – 19 B.C.), the great Roman poet who wrote the epic *Aeneid*, is Dante's guide through Hell.

Students should pay careful attention to the symbolism and construction of each scene, and to the place of each scene within the poem. They should know the autobiographical details behind each scene and behind the whole poem. Finally, they should note the particular features of Dante's poetic style.

It is not enough to merely read the Cantos. Students will understand the play more fully and have an easier and more rewarding experience if they study the notes at the beginning and end of each Canto. *The Inferno* is a complex, difficult work, and it is appropriate for an advanced class.

All references come from the Signet Classic edition of *The Inferno*, translated by John Ciardi, copyright 2009.

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Biography of Dante Alighieri

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in 1265, into a moderately respectable family, which, in the civil strife that divided Italy during this period, belonged to the Guelph faction. During Dante's first year of life, fighting took place between the Guelph and another large family, the Ghibelline. From 1266, the Ghibelline were banished, and the discord in Florence was between two sub-factions of the Guelph, called "White" and "Black." Dante was a supporter of the "White" group. It was in the service of this group that he traveled to Rome in 1301, seeking aid from Pope Boniface VIII. The Pope, however, secretly supported the "Black" faction. While Dante and two other emissaries were in Rome, Boniface arranged for the overthrow of Florence's "White" rulers. As a result, Dante was exiled from Florence. He spent the rest of his life traveling around Italy and died in Ravenna after a trip to Venice in 1321.

Dante's works include the *Vita Nuova*, a vaguely autobiographical collection of poems centering on his love for the ethereal Beatrice; *De vulgari eloquentia*, a defense of the use of vernacular language in literature; *Monarchia*, a political treatise about the balance of power between the Church and the Emperor; and *La Divina Commedia*.

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Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the symbolism of the punishments in Hell.
2. explain the structure of Hell (i.e., division of Upper and Lower Hell and subdivision of Lower Hell, location of Limbo, the four rivers, and city of Dis).
3. explain the classical symbolism of the four rivers of Hell, and show how Dante makes them fit his own symbolism.
4. explain the significance of the lion, leopard, and she-wolf.
5. discuss Dante's symbolic astrology, and trace it through the poem.
6. understand the original meter and importance of the date of the poem.
7. summarize the relation of Human Reason to Divine Grace in the poem.
8. analyze the numerical symbolism of *The Inferno*.
9. explain the significance of the date on which the journey begins and ends.
10. explain the use and significance of imagery involving the following: dark woods, mountains, rivers, stars, fire, ice.
11. explain the important literary figures in Hell and the works from which Dante drew them.
12. give a brief summary of the civil unrest in Dante's Florence, and explain his own involvement.
13. explain the presence of the clergy in Hell and the condition of the Catholic Church in Dante's time.
14. explain the function of the political prophecies uttered by characters in the poem.
15. outline the difference between "Fate" and "Fortune," and cite mention of each in the poem.
16. explain who Virgil was, when he lived, what he wrote, and why he was important to Dante.
17. describe Dante's use of poetic conventions, including epic similes, invocation of the Muses, and a metaphor drawn from the love poetry of his own day.

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. *The Divine Comedy* is divided into three sections: *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. In *The Inferno*, Dante learns to recognize sin; in *Purgatory*, he renounces it. What is the importance of recognition to repentance and forgiveness?
2. At first, Dante follows Virgil with great eagerness and high hopes. By Canto II, however, Dante's spirits have begun to flag. Why does he think he cannot make the journey? How is he persuaded to go on?
3. An epic poem is typically a lengthy chronicle of a legendary hero's adventure. The poet often uses epic similes and formally appeals to the Muses for help writing the poem. Would you say *The Inferno* fits the definition of an "epic" poem? List some reasons why it should or should not be called "epic."
4. What is the significance of the inscription above Hell's gate? How does it help to explain why the inhabitants of Hell are static, rather than dynamic, characters?
5. Why are the "Opportunists" punished outside of Hell? What was the nature of their sin? How is their self-interest different from the self-interest shown by the sinners of Lower Hell?
6. What is the symbolism of the citadel Dante and Virgil see in Limbo? Why are the people in Limbo unable to get to Paradise?
7. As the poets pass through the Second Circle, home of the "carnal" sinners, Dante catches sight of Dido, who killed herself for love. A separate Circle is set aside for suicides, so why is Dido in this specific Circle? What, might we infer, did Dante think of her sin?
8. Why does Dante faint at the end of Canto V? How is his swoon like the cord he uses in Canto XVI?
9. In Canto VI, Ciaccio, the glutton, prophesies to Dante about Guelph infighting. Of course, as Dante was writing, everything that Ciaccio "predicts" had already happened. Why does Dante include such "prophecies"? How are they related to his reason for writing *The Inferno*? Consider the prophecies of Farinata (Canto X) and Brunetto (Canto XV) as you answer.
10. Ciaccio is eager to be remembered on Earth and asks Dante to speak his name among the living. What is the importance of his desire to be known? Does everyone in Hell want to be remembered?

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Canto I

Vocabulary

allotted – given; assigned
apprenticeship – a position in which one works with a master to learn a skill or trade
arduous – difficult, grueling
attrition – sorrow for one's sins brought on by the fear of damnation
avarice – greed
drear – dismal, gloomy
equinoctial – relating to the imaginary line in the sky located directly over the equator
fugitive – on the run; fleeing
gaudy – showy, flashy
gaunt – thin and bony
glut – the state of being full or stuffed
incontinence – a lack of self-control
juxtaposition – placement side by side to highlight a similarity or difference
lamentation – an expression of grief or sorrow; a mournful cry
malice – evil intent
pelt – the fur of an animal
perilous – dangerous, unsafe
pinnacle – the highest point
piteous – pathetic; sad
rank – overgrown with trees and plants; jungle-like
ravening – hungry; greedy
recount – to tell or narrate
renunciation – the act of rejecting or abandoning
sage – a wise person
savagery – brutality or ferociousness
shade – a spirit or ghost
threescore – sixty (One score equals twenty.)
tremulous – shaky; trembling
wavered – moved in a hesitant or uncertain way
whence – from what place
wracked – wrecked, destroyed
zeal – passion, enthusiasm

4. Why is Christ called “a Mighty One”?

5. How does recognition or remembrance play a part in the fate of the pagan poets? Name the five poets in the group.

6. How do the great poets respond to Dante?

7. Describe and identify the people Dante sees standing around the citadel. You may need an outside source, like an encyclopedia or the Internet to do so.

Canto IX

Vocabulary

acrid – unpleasantly strong, harsh, or bitter
allegory – a symbolic tale representing abstract ideas or moral qualities
biers – coffins; burial platforms
expounded – explained
helter-skelter – in a haphazard or chaotic way
hydras – mythological snakelike monsters with nine heads
ordinance – a rule, order, or regulation
probity – honesty; integrity; goodness
stagnant – not flowing or moving; still

1. At the end of Canto VIII, Virgil seems certain his plea for assistance will be answered. At the beginning of this Canto, however, he seems to vacillate. What is the allegorical meaning of this change?

2. What is the precedent upon which Virgil bases his hope for a successful journey and safe return from Hell?

3. Why must Virgil place his hands over Dante's eyes? What symbolism can we infer from this act?

Canto XVII

Vocabulary

argent – silver in color
azure – light blue in color
benign – kind; gentle
cavalier – a gallant gentleman
excursion – a brief trip
guile – deceit, trickery
precipice – a steep cliff
prototype – an original model
sovereign – having supreme rank; royal
undaunted – courageous

1. What is the symbolism of Geryon?

2. Why does Dante include the brief interlude in which he goes to observe the Usurers?

3. What is the allegorical significance of Virgil's encouragement?
