

Discussion Guide

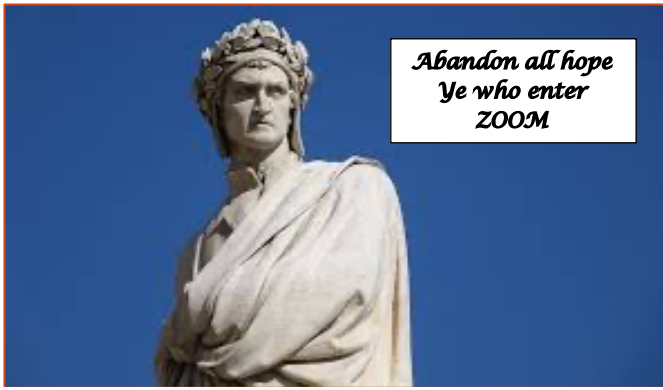
Inferno Canto I

The Dark Wood of Error

A structural note before we begin: *Commedia* is 3 books, 100 Cantos total, 34 for *Inferno*, 33 for *Purgatorio*, 33 for *Paradiso*. The extra Canto in *Inferno* is this one...it serves as the introduction to the whole 3-part epic poem. The Cantos are divided into *tercets*—3-line stanzas. In Italian, each line is 11 beats, so each tercet is 33 syllables. Why is Dante obsessed with the number 3? Because it is the Divine Number, of course.

Look for the Epic Conventions: *in medias res*; elevated language; a vast landscape; a muse (Virgil? Beatrice?); epic similes; an epic hero (Dante the pilgrim...we should emulate him!); the journey/quest; the epic catalogue (lists); speeches

- A simple outline: Part One: Lines 1-60 – Dante’s Ruin; Part Two: Lines 61-136 – Dante’s Rescue
- “our” (1) suggests an allegory: it’s our metaphorical journey too
- “I” (1) suggests Dante’s admission that he himself has culpability for his situation (don’t we all?)
- What is the generally accepted life span? See Psalm 90.1. So if Dante is 35, what year is it? Significant?
- What might the dark wood represent, metaphorically speaking?
- “memory” (6) means he’s looking back. So how does his being retrospective enhance the narrative?
- Without divine help, he feels he won’t make it out (9)
- What might he be implying by calling himself “drugged and loose with sleep?” (11)
- What might have been the sin that plunged him into this mess? (Research the possibilities)
- The sun is referred to as a “planet” (17). So we’re working off the Ptolemaic model of the universe.
- The first epic simile is of the exhausted swimmer (22ff)...he wants his readers to experience this
- The 3 categories of sin come from Aristotle; the 3 beasts from Jeremiah 5.6. Lots to discuss here!
- What clues tell us it is Easter weekend? Significant?
- Fortune’s Wheel (56)...a cool Medieval concept. Look it up! (Where are you on the wheel today?)
- Virgil seems to represent Reason...the best that man can be apart from God’s direct revelation
- What’s wrong with Virgil’s voice?
- Virgil is bragging about writing the Aeneid (72), but this is important as we go further
- Virgil is Dante’s all-time favorite poet! Lol
- Dante would like a shortcut to get past the beasts...um, shortcuts are bad, ok? But why?
- The mountain is Purgatory. Unless you are well-versed in Medieval Catholic theology, we’ll need to chat about what this means. But for now, the only difference between *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* is that souls in the former are forever damned, while those in the latter are repentant and therefore eventually bound for *Paradiso*.
- Beatrice alert! (116)
- Artists have made attempts to create graphics of Dante’s imagined world...look up some of these, you may find them helpful



Discussion Guide

Inferno Canto II

The Descent

Inferno Canto III

The Vestibule of Hell: The Opportunists

If Canto I is the introduction to *Commedia*, then **Canto II is the introduction or prologue to *Inferno***. Since both Cantos serve as introductions, there are **clear structural parallels** between them:

Canto I

Dante's peril (1-27) – transitional simile
 Three Beasts (28-60) – transitional simile
 Virgil's assurance (61-136)

Canto II

Dante's understanding (1-42) – transitional simile
 Three Blessed Ladies (43-126) – transitional simile
 Dante's will strengthened (127-142)

Dante's attention to structure also applies to the **symmetrical arrangement of the speakers: DVBVBVD!**

II

- A key concept is the “double war / of the journey and the pity” (4-5). Dante is referring to the physical and emotional challenge of the way before him, essentially the Christian life—the flesh and the spirit.
- Note the trinitarian formula in the 3rd tercet. But, what are pagan Muses doing in a Christian epic?
- Why does Dante feel inadequate to assume the role of Epic Hero?
- “words” (*parole*, 43) appears five times in Canto II. Why the emphasis?
- Virgil is basically drafted by Beatrice (52). Divine truth trumps human reason. Rock Paper Scissors!
- What is Beatrice's basic appeal?
- They are in the sublunary circle where everything is tainted by sin (78). Thanks Ptolemy!
- The Ladies are Mary, Lucia, and Beatrice. Why are these people here? (Btw, we never speak Mary's name in Hell.)

III

- The Gate has no bars; anyone can enter. The point is that those who do enter are choosing the path of sin and they experience the consequences. *Keep in mind that Dante is entering a vision of Hell, not Hell itself.*
- What is to be understood by the inscriptions?
- The opportunists have a distorted view of reality (18)
- Note the auditory imagery. Hell is disorienting, an assault upon the senses. Remember this!
- The Opportunists have no sense of right or wrong—only self-service. No one sin defines them. They get no mercy nor justice. They are not good enough for Heaven and Hell doesn't want them!
- Note the language of negation that describes these folks: they are without names (36; 49), hope (46), pity (50), life (64)... and clothes (65)! People who stand for nothing inherit nothing eternal but suffering
- “The Great Denial” refers to Pope Celestine V (57). His abdication in 1294 allowed Boniface to send Dante into exile.
- Souls bound for Heaven never cross the Acheron; they take the Tiber to the Mount of Purgatory
- Dante, being mortal, nearly sinks Charon's boat (90)!
- Some key lines for deeper understanding of the sinners' plight: 97-105; 123
- Again, Dante's senses are overwhelmed, and he faints! (134) Wouldn't you?



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Inferno Canto V

Circle 2: The Carnal

Inferno Canto X

Circle 6: The Heretics

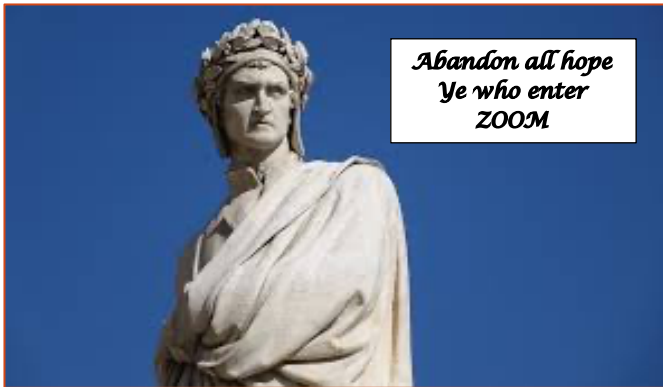
V

- The *contrapasso*: as the lovers lacked self-control in life, they are denied all self-control in death
- Wisdom from the She-Wolf: giving in to one's passions has consequences that are not readily apparent
- The degree of pain from Limbo (Circle 1) is significant; note Ciardi's word "bestial" (3)
- Minos: Judge of the Dead from mythology; how does Dante appropriate the figure for his purposes?
- How exactly does the tail thing work? (10-11)
- All the verbs describing Minos' actions are present tense... significance?
- There is a perverse parody of the act of confession here (6-15)... do you catch the irony?
- How do you interpret Minos's warning to Dante? Note Virgil's response: is free will, or fate, in view?
- The word "ruined" (34) is much debated; Ciardi's note seems reasonable
- How do you interpret line 39?
- What might have been the consequences resulting from the actions of the sinners named in 52-67?
- Note Dante's emotions as he calls out to Paulo and Francesca
- Let's read their initial answer in lines 88-105. Reactions? Note the anaphora—Love! Love! Love!
- Francesca excuses herself, saying Paulo was hot, her husband was disgusting, etc. Comments?
- St. Augustine was converted reading the Apostle Paul; Frankie reads romance and falls for Paulo!
- Lancelot—Frankie omits that because of his affair with Guinevere, he is denied the Holy Grail.
- Does Dante feel some self-reproach here? He is a poet, too, after all. Predictably, he faints again!
- *Amore* and *pieta* are the key words in the Canto. Positive emotions, when perverted, become sins.
- Look again at line 108. Well?

Cantos VI – IX: Gluttons wallowing in filth; Hoarders and Wasters in combat; the Wrathful swimming in filth and tearing each other to pieces; Lost Angels guarding the gate of the City of Dis; a Heavenly Messenger arriving to admit Dante and Virgil; the Heretics are just inside, entombed in a fiery morgue.

X

- Jehosaphat (11) refers to the site in Palestine of the Last Judgment (Joel 3:2, 12)
- Epicurus, 342-270 BC: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die." Do you see the irony?
- Can Virgil read minds? (16-18)
- What is suggested by Farinata's features, body language, and interrogation of Dante? (21-51)
- Note the contrast between the Stoic Farinata and Guido Cavalcanti, a famous Epicurean (52-72)
- What is the nature of the shades' knowledge of what happens on Earth? (79-81; 96-108)
- Dante is disturbed by Farinata's prophecy. What is the lesson in Virgil's counsel (124-137)?



Discussion Guide

Inferno Canto XIII

Circle 7: The Violent Against Themselves

Inferno Canto XV

Circle 7: The Violent Against Nature

XIII

- Virgil says Dante would not understand this without seeing for himself. Implications?
- Dante uses forms of the same word *smarrita* (lost) as in Canto I. Was he himself suicidal then?
- Virgil himself is almost apologetic...should we consider this a subversive text?
- The Harpies, btw, are Virgil's creation (see *Aeneid* III).
- "Caesar's face" (64) refers to any Emperor. Is there a sidebar here about the seduction of power?
- Piers' testimony is a masterclass on classical oratory; quite convincing, isn't it? But he's still here.
- At several points in the narrative, there is evidence of the importance of Pier's story being told. Why?
- Consider the ironies of the *contrapasso* as indicated in lines 97-102.
- The essence of Dante's justification for damning the suicides is given in 104-105. Is it enough?
- How do you feel about the sin represented by Giacomo and Lano, the Squanderers?
- Ciardi says that this "fad of violent wasting...is hard to imagine today." Do you agree?
- The Squanderers injure an anonymous suicide; Look ahead to XIV.1-3; saddest lines in *Inferno*?

Canto XIV: The Violent Against God, Nature, and Art. Emerging from the Forest of Suicides, Dante and Virgil arrive on a wide expanse of burning sands, with raining fire. The sinners are Blasphemers, Sodomites, and Usurers. So, how would you explain Dante's understanding of violence?

XV

- Try to picture how Dante describes the way he and Virgil physically navigate this hellscape.
- Lines 17-21 may suggest a familiar sight in Florence—the men cruising the dark streets for liaisons.
- Brunetto Latino was highly respected by Dante—note the evidence of his respect in the text.
- Dante's confession in 49-54 is striking and distances him from the unrepentant Brunetto.
- Dante honors Brunetto in 79-87; what does a close reading of this passage suggest?
- Brunetto doesn't seem to recognize or acknowledge Virgil, who is off-stage throughout the Canto, walking ahead of the poets. His only remark is in line 99, which gives it added significance—explain.
- Note that Brunetto's friends are all men of letters; is their sexuality inside information for Dante?
- Dante's final assessment of Brunetto (119-122) is instructive, as are two scripture verses:

The race is not to the swift, or the battle to the strong. (Eccl. 9.11)

Know ye not that they who run in a race run all, but one receives the prize? (1 Cor. 9.24)

- Look ahead to XVI, where more of these sinners are named; they were good Guelphs, but...
- Some scholars debate that the sin punished here is homosexuality, because in Purgatory it is considered lust and not in this category of violence against Nature. In *Inferno* XI.50, however, Dante uses the word *Soddoma* in referencing this sin in the category of violence, and in *Purgatorio* XXVI.40 he has the repentant sinners use the same word in their confessions. His understatement here is likely due to the fact that he knew and respected these people for their contributions to Florentine society.



Discussion Guide

Inferno Canto XVII

Circle 7: The Violent Against Art; Geryon

Inferno Canto XVIII

Circle 8: Fraud—the *Malebolgia*

Inferno Canto XIX

Circle 8: The Simoniacs

XVII

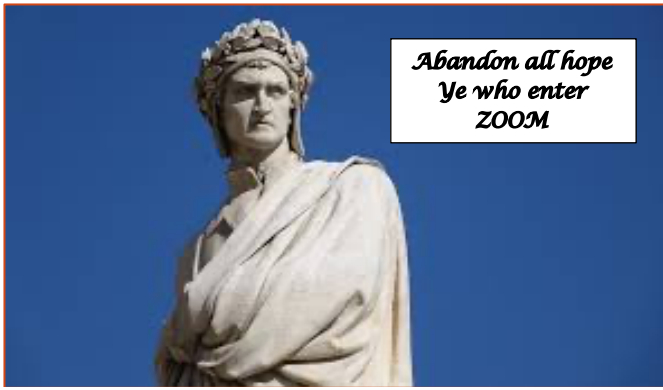
- Ciardi shows the waterfall on p.38; Virgil summons Geryon, who rides them down to Circle 8
- Discuss how Geryon might represent “the prototype of fraud” (7-27)
- In the tradition Dante knew, Geryon enticed strangers to kill and eat them; he was killed by Hercules
- In what way is usury classified as violence? In what way is their *contrapasso* appropriate?
- The usurers await “the sovereign cavalier” (Biamonte); Ciardi notes his great reputation in Florence!
- The flight over the great cliff is essentially an action scene; Dante’s imagistic skill is on full display here
- We’re now entering the domain of the Leopard (fraud & malice), where the vilest sinners are punished

XVIII

- Consider that a full half of *Inferno* (the last 17 Cantos) is devoted to the sins of fraud
- There are ten *malebolgia* (“evil pits”) for simple fraud; discuss the variants using the chart on p. 140
- The “well” (5) is the pit of Lower Hell, which we’ll visit in Cantos 29-34.
- The comparison of the panders with the Roman festival above (24-33) is a nice poetic move.
- The whipping (34-36) may relate to the Florentine custom of scourging prisoners otw to execution
- Interestingly, the sinners this far down don’t want to be remembered (47-48). Pimping is bad, y’all.
- How many clever names for the flatterers’ “river of excrement” (113) can we come up with?
- Ciardi notes that Dante’s language here is suitably coarse. Remember our 8th “Key”?
- What contemporary equivalents for panders, seducers, and flatterers can you name?

XIX

- This episode is on the cover; art by Gustav Dore (1832-83), the most famous illustrator of *Inferno*.
- For context in understanding this *contrapasso*, look up a pic of the baptistry font at Pisa.
- Dante’s use of the word “mouth” (22) suggests these guys will eventually be swallowed up by Hell
- Note that Pope Boniface, Dante’s nemesis, is expected soon (he will die in 1303); Nicholas’s mistaking Dante for him is amusing (49-54). Lit freaks can research why this passage is crucial in dating Dante’s writing of *Inferno*.
- Dante equates the corrupt church of his time with John’s vision of pagan Rome in *Revelation* here (100-111); there are, sadly, quite a few holders of high ecclesiastical office scattered around *Inferno*
- Dante’s rant in 84ff pleases Virgil immensely (115ff)...why?
- What is “The Donation of Constantine” and how is it relevant here? Google it and you’ll get it. Dante will address this subject in a later work, *Monarchia*. (He has strong opinions, as you might guess!)



Discussion Guide

Inferno Canto XXVI

Circle 8: The Evil Counselors

Inferno Canto XXVIII

Circle 8: The Sowers of Discord

Inferno Canto XXX

Circle 8: The Falsifiers

Notes from pits past: Perhaps the most comic scene in *Inferno* is Canto XXI, where the Grafters are taunted by idiot demons led by one *Malacoda* (“Bad Ass”), who tries to trick Dante and fails. (Remember, the charge brought against Dante resulting in his exile was graft.) Caiaphas, the High Priest of the Jews who demanded Jesus be put to death, is crucified on the floor of *Bolgia* 6, where other notorious Hypocrites walk on top of him, wearing leaden robes.

XXVI

- It’s a great sin to use your God-given brains to devise sinister plots. Thus, the Evil Counselors are swallowed up in flames, completely obscured in “a fiery travesty of tongues” (Ciardi)
- Note that Dante struggles to move forward (16-18); Hell is wrecked down here (from the Harrowing)
- There are a lot of these sinners here—Dante compares them to fireflies (25)
- Ulysses and Diomedes are here; consider Dante’s possible view of pagan vs. Christian ideals
- Remember, Troy is good (Rome’s founders), Greece is bad. Go Trojans!
- What are the highlights of Ulysses’ long speech? This is Dante’s invention—perhaps he is showing he’s as good as Homer! (Note that Ulysses’ tale begins like an epic, *in medias res*.)

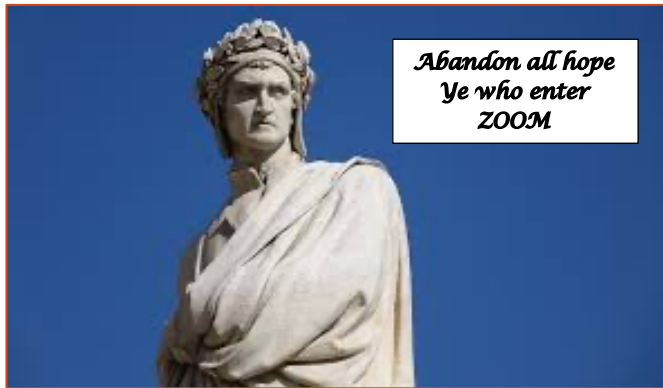
In Canto XXVII, we meet a notable sinner, Guido da Montefeltro, who blames his problems on Boniface. What’s interesting though is Dante’s simile in line 7, in which he compares this *contrapasso* to the Sicilian bull (see Ciardi’s note).

XXVIII

- There are 3 contexts in which these shades created conflict: religion, politics, and family.
- Mohammed is here. Any thoughts on this? Some scholars think that Dante thought of Mohammed as a Christian who launched a rival sect. The discord that is in view here is also the source of the Sunni and Shiite factions that exist today, originating with Ali’s succession in 656.
- Bertrand de Born speaking through his severed head is a striking image; he uses the term *contrapasso* here, which Ciardi loosely translates “the law of Hell” (143). Look up the Latin roots; how would you translate it? Notably, Bertrand was a poet.

XXX

- Fun Fact: The insult-laden argument between Simon and Adam that Dante seems to enjoy so much is based on a peculiarly Italian poetic style called *tenzone* (The word seems to have originated in Old French, coming through Latin and then into Italian. A tangential English equivalent might be the word, “tension”).
- What is Virgil’s problem with Dante (130ff)? Is there a larger point to this episode? Is Dante (the poet) being something of a hypocrite himself here?



Discussion Guide

Inferno Canto XXXII

Circle 9: The Treacherous to Kin & Country

Inferno Canto XXXIII

Circle 9: The Treacherous to Guests & Hosts

Inferno Canto XXXIV

The Center: Betrayers of Lords; Satan

The central pit of Hell is a well surrounded by giants; inside it is Circle 9—a huge frozen lake. There are four interior rings, discernible by the manner by which the sinners are lodged in the ice. These are the Betrayers: deniers of love for family, country, hospitality, and finally, masters.

XXXII

- Lines 10-12 form Dante's 2nd invocation (see II.7-9).
- Dante is staring up at the wall in wonder, when he is called to attend to his situation (22). Like Zoom!
- Dante's initial description of the sinners encased here is worth a close read (31-39). Frogs! Storks!
- The head butting of the brothers parodies the Christian kiss of peace (46-51)
- The outer circle is Caina, named for the first murderer. Mordred, Arthur's rebellious son, is here too
- Antenora is for traitors (we enter at line 70); Dante kicks one in the head (77)! On purpose?
- Let's discuss Dante's rage at Bocca in lines 82-111ff; it's another *tenzone*, in five parts
- Count Ugolino is the guy chewing on the other's neck...his story is picked up in the next Canto
- We might reflect here that Virgil has not spoken in this entire Canto. Any theories?

XXXIII

- The story takes up the first 78 lines...not Ugolino's unrepentant attitude
- Fun fact: the building, less the infamous tower, still stands in the Piazza de Cavilieri in Pisa
- Why is Dante not weeping (40-43)? Btw, words for weeping occur thirteen times in this Canto
- Luke 11:5-13 stands behind Ugolino's words in line 49. There is much more to consider here.
- The historical fact of Ugolino's cannibalizing his children is oft debated by geeky scholars.
- Note that Dante blames Pisa (79-81) for the tragedy
- Ptolomea begins in line 91; Dante feels an icy wind in line 103...where do you think it comes from?
- Ptolomeus is found in Maccabees, in the Catholic Bible, not accepted by Protestants (Apocrypha)
- Alberigo has an interesting theory of demon possession in lines 124-138; Dante is skeptical (139)
- Is Dante mean in refusing to clear Alberigo's eyes a third time (148-150)?

XXXIV

- Judecca is named for its famous resident, whose fate is shared by Brutus and Cassius
- Ciardi uses the word "engine" to describe Satan (6). Not what you expected, perhaps?
- If you do the math ($6/70 = 70/x$; $x = 817 \times 2.5$), Satan is about 2000 feet tall (28-32)
- Discuss the aspects of Satan's character as you find them in this Canto.
- What are Dante's three questions, and how does Virgil answer them (100-135)?
- The geographical description beginning in line 111 is graphically represented in *World of Dante*:
http://www.worldofdante.org/astro_detail9.html
- Lethe is the river of lost memories; it has a rich classical and literary history. See Ciardi's note.
- The last lines of *Inferno* are among the most memorable in world literature. Interpretations?