

INFERNO: PART I

TEACHER GUIDE

BACKGROUND

Inferno is only the first part of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*, an epic masterpiece of imagination. In an effort to make the spiritual world tangible, Dante the poet depicts Dante the pilgrim's journey through the afterlife—detailing all the horrors and wonders he sees there; however, as Dante literally travels through the depths of Hell, climbs the mountain of Purgatory, and ascends into the heights of Heaven itself, his journey symbolizes the soul's journey toward God—a slow realization of the supremacy of God's will.

As Dante encounters the souls tortured in Hell, he feels pity for their plight, but he is reprimanded for this by Virgil, the Roman poet who acts as his guide. Feeling sorry for these damned souls is questioning God's judgment. Sojourning through Hell eventually teaches Dante the reality and (literal) depths of sin. Only then is he able to climb out of Hell and proceed to Purgatory, a mountain where hard labor purifies the soul of sin. Climbing this mountain, he finally reaches the portal of Heaven, where only the sinless may enter. Because he has confronted and renounced his own sin, Dante is able to enter in. The three parts of *The Divine Comedy*, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*, may form the most elaborate spiritual metaphor of all time.

Inferno, however, remains the most widely read portion of the poem because of its morbid imagery and ghoulish delights. Readers are both repulsed and fascinated by the dark punishments that Hell holds. For

readers less interested in the spiritual aspects of the poem, there is still a sobering lesson: Humans are frail creatures, who are often the biggest contributors to their own destruction.

SUMMARY

Losing his way from the true path, Dante finds himself lost in the Wood of Error, where he is confronted by three beasts: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. These beasts prevent him from finding his way out of the wood until the spirit of Virgil, a Roman poet and a hero of Dante's, appears to him. Virgil tells Dante he has been sent by Beatrice, a woman Dante once loved, to rescue him by leading him through the horrors of Hell. Only by passing through Hell will Dante be able to reach Purgatory and eventually Heaven. Virgil warns Dante not to pity the souls he sees in Hell, for in doing so he is questioning God's divine judgment.

As Virgil leads Dante into Hell, they see the message "Abandon all hope ye who enter here" engraved above its entrance. The first set of souls the two travelers encounter are those trapped just outside Hell, the Opportunists, who are forced to chase a blank banner through the darkness, where they are also stung by hornets. Virgil explains that Hell is a cone created by Satan's fall from Heaven that descends to the center of the earth. Before they can cross into the first circle of Hell, they must cross over the Acheron River on the ferry of Charon the Boatman. After Charon refuses to ferry them, the earth shakes, and Dante faints.

When Dante awakes, Virgil leads him into Limbo, where the virtuous who died without salvation are kept. Here they meet

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the Virtuous Pagans, famous figures from the ancient world like Homer, Socrates, and Plato. This is Virgil's home in Hell, and he remembers a time when a "Mighty One," Jesus Christ rescued the souls of Old Testament heroes like Adam and Moses out of Limbo. Continuing on, Dante and Virgil encounter the souls of the Lustful that are caught up in an eternal whirlwind. Dante asks to speak to two souls that are clinging together: Francesca and Paolo, two Italians famous for their adulterous affair. She tells Dante how she and her lover were reading a book about Lancelot and Guinevere when passion overtook them, and they "read no more that day." Dante is overcome with pity for the woman, and he faints.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- How can we realize our shortcomings before they destroy us?
- When faced with a daunting task, how can we overcome our fears?

CONNECT: YOUR GUIDE THROUGH HELL

Pretend that you have been given the news that *you* must descend into Hell, the land of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Whom would you choose to be your guide through these terrors? Remember, Dante chose Virgil, his favorite author. Explain whom you would choose and why!

ANTICIPATORY QUESTIONS

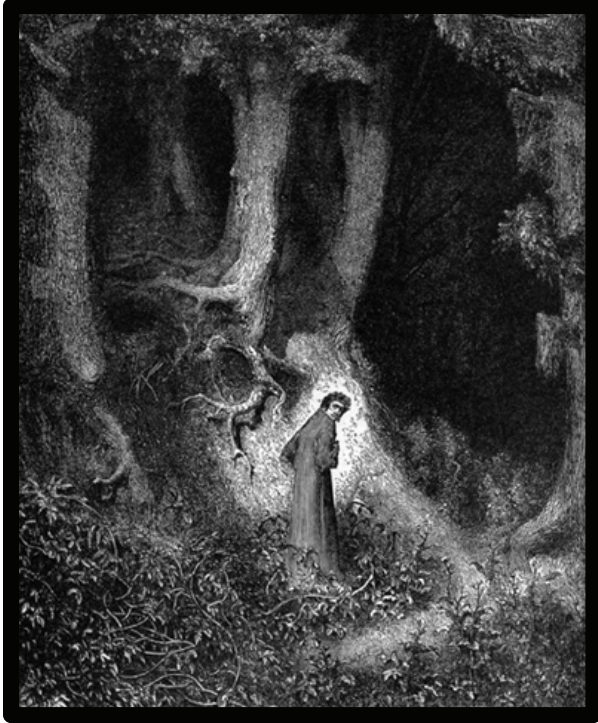
- What are some images or ideas that are commonly associated with Hell?
- What are some of the details about the Underworld from Greek mythology?

TEACHABLE TERMS

- **Allegory** Dante uses allegory extensively in this first portion of the *Inferno*. On pg. 11 sin is personified as a dark wood, and the animals therein symbolize sin as well. On pg. 11 the leopard, lion, and she-wolf represent incontinence, violence, and deceit respectively.
- **Poetic Justice** Each of the punishments Dante will witness in Hell is intended to echo the crime the souls committed on earth. On pg. 14 the Opportunists chase a blank banner through the darkness—indicating that they stand for nothing. Likewise, on pg. 17 the Lustful are hurled through the air in a whirlwind because they were controlled by the whirlwind of their passion in life.
- **Theme: The Limits of Human Wisdom** Among the Virtuous Pagans are many noble philosophers and poets, including Virgil himself, yet their human wisdom cannot save them. Without God's grace and salvation they are doomed to Hell.

RECALL QUESTIONS

1. Who will be Dante's guide as he journeys through Hell?
2. What do the Opportunists chase through the darkness?
3. What kind of people is forced to live in Limbo, the first circle of Hell?
4. How are the souls of the Lustful punished?
5. What caused Francesca and her lover to succumb to passion?



INFERNO: PART I

CAST

NARRATOR	<i>Dante the Poet</i>
DANTE	<i>Dante the Pilgrim</i>
LEOPARD	<i>Savage Beast</i>
LION	<i>Savage Beast</i>
SHE-WOLF	<i>Savage Beast</i>
BEATRICE	<i>Dante's Deceased Love</i>
VIRGIL	<i>Deceased Roman Poet</i>
CHARON	<i>Boatman of the Acheron</i>
MINOS	<i>Judge of the Dead</i>
FRANCESCA	<i>Spirit Trapped by Lust</i>

NARRATOR: Midway in life's journey, I strayed from the straight road and woke to find myself alone in a dark wood.

DANTE: What is this place? I have never seen so drear, so rank, or arduous a wilderness!

NARRATOR: Even now its very memory gives a shape to fear itself! How I came to it I cannot rightly say. I had become so drugged and sleepy when I first wandered there from the True Way.

I found myself before a little hill and lifted up my eyes. I pushed up that slope, but lo! Almost at the beginning of the rise, a spotted leopard sprang from the twisted trees.

LEOPARD: *(leopardy snarl)*

DANTE: *(cry of fright)* Ah!

LEOPARD: *(growling)* Hapless pilgrim! I will block your passage at every turn and will not let you pass! For you are in the Wood of Error, and I will not let you continue up to the Mountain of Joy. I am the Leopard of Incontinence—your lack of self-control!

NARRATOR: Suddenly from the dark trees, a great lion broke in upon me as well, raging with hunger.

DANTE: *(cry of fright)* Ah!

LION: *(roaring)* Foolish traveler! I am the Lion of Violence, and I will also block your way to the Mountain of Joy!

NARRATOR: Then a she-wolf charged upon me, a starved, ravening horror—her body wasted beyond all belief.

SHE-WOLF: *(growling)* Woeful wayfarer! I am the She-Wolf of Fraud and Deceit! Oh many are the souls I have brought to endless grief! And you shall be no different!

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NARRATOR: I fell back, but the wolf-beast pursued me, forcing herself against me, bit by bit, until I slid back into the sunless wood.

DANTE: My very soul is lost!

NARRATOR: But then suddenly a presence gathered before me on the discolored air—a mysterious figure. It seemed to be one who was hoarse from long silence.

VIRGIL: (*hoarse moaning*)

SHE-WOLF: (*hissing*)

DANTE: (*frightened*) Have pity on me, whatever you are—man or spirit!

NARRATOR: As the beasts withdrew, the shade answered.

VIRGIL: I am not a man—though once I was. I was born late during the reign of Julius Caesar and lived in Rome under the good Augustus—during the time of false and lying gods. A poet was I, and I sang of that just hero Aeneas, son of Anchises, who came forth from Troy after the great city of Ilium was burned.

NARRATOR: The spirit paused.

VIRGIL: But *I* marvel at you! Why do you go back downhill into that foul forest? Why do you not climb the Mountain of Joy? That summit is the source and cause of every happiness.

NARRATOR: I answered the spirit bashfully.

DANTE: (*in awe*) Are you truly Virgil? That fountain which spreads abroad so wide a river of speech? You are my master—and my author! You are the one from whom I took that beautiful style that has brought me honor.

NARRATOR: I noticed the glowing eyes of the she-wolf still hovering in the nearby shadows, and I pointed toward her.

DANTE: See the beast for which I have turned back? Will you protect me from her, famous sage? She makes my veins and pulses tremble!

SHE-WOLF: (*growling*)

NARRATOR: I began to weep.

DANTE: (*weeping*) I am powerless against her.

VIRGIL: If from this savage place you hope to escape, it behooves you to take another road. This beast suffers no one to pass her way. She harasses her prey and destroys them. She has a nature so destructive and ruthless that whenever she gluts her greedy appetite, she is hungrier than before. One day the Greyhound will come, who shall make her perish in her pain. Through every city shall he hunt her down! He shall drive her back to Hell from where she first came.

NARRATOR: I looked up with hope.

VIRGIL: Therefore I think it is best that you follow me, and I will be your guide. I will lead you through an eternal place, where you shall see the desperate spirits who cry out for the second death. After that,

you will see those who suffer through the fires of Purgatory and hope to enter the home of the blessed. If you wish to ascend past that plane, a soul worthier than I must lead you. For the Emperor, who reigns above, has declared that I may never pass into His city, for I was rebellious to his law. Oh, happy are those that He chooses!

DANTE: (*eagerly*) Please! Conduct me to those places you have said! I long to see the portal of Saint Peter! As well as those happy souls that make you so unhappy.

NARRATOR: The form of Virgil turned and moved on, and I followed behind him. Day was departing, and I made himself ready to sustain the way and the woe that lay before me.

DANTE: Poet!

NARRATOR: The spirit of Virgil paused and turned.

DANTE: Regard my manhood before you lead me into this arduous pass. You said that Aeneas, while still mortal, went into the immortal world. But I am not Aeneas. I am not Paul. No one thinks me worthy of such a journey. Therefore, if I resign myself to go there, I fear it may be ill-advised. But you are wise, and you know better than I.

NARRATOR: The poet's brow furrowed.

VIRGIL: (*angrily*) Your soul is laden with cowardice! It encumbers a man, so that it turns him back from an honorable enterprise—like a shadow does to a skittish beast! To free you of this apprehension, I will tell you why I came here, and what I have heard concerning you.

NARRATOR: The spirit began to remember.

VIRGIL: I was in Limbo, and a fair, saintly lady called to me. Her eyes were shining brighter than the stars, and she began to speak, gentle and low, with an angelic voice in another language.

BEATRICE: I am Beatrice. A friend of mine is trapped upon a wilderness slope. He may already be lost. I come from Heaven, where I will soon return. Love moved me, and it compels me to speak.

VIRGIL: And unto you I came, as she desired. I have delivered you from that wild beast, which had cornered you. So why do you delay? How can you stall any longer when you see that such ladies are caring for you in the court of Heaven?

DANTE: O it was compassionate Beatrice, who aided me! Poet, I am ready for the adventure before me! You are my leader, lord, and master!

NARRATOR: There we entered on the deep and savage way. A dark gate soon appeared, and cut into stone above it ran these mysterious words.

DANTE: (*reading*) I am the way into the City of Woe. I am the way to a forsaken people. I am the way into eternal sorrow. Sacred justice moved my Architect. I was raised here by Divine Omnipotence, Primordial Love, and Ultimate Intellect. Only those elements time cannot destroy were made before me, and beyond time I stand. Abandon all hope ye who enter here.

NARRATOR: I turned to Virgil.

Inferno: Part I Reading Guide

Name _____

1. **Background:** How old is Dante the pilgrim when he wanders into the Wood of Error?
2. **Analyze:** Why would Dante choose a forest (or wood) as a metaphor for sin?
3. What are the three beasts that assail Dante in the Wood of Error?
4. The spirit of Virgil appears to Dante. What is Virgil's claim to fame?
5. **Analyze:** Why would Dante choose this person to be his guide through Hell?
6. Virgil tells Dante that he is fated to pass through what place?
7. What harmful emotion does Virgil sense in Dante?
8. What heavenly lady sent Virgil to seek for Dante in the Wood of Error?
9. What famous line is carved over the portal to Hell?
10. **Analyze:** Why is Hell the only place beyond hope?
11. What was the crime of the Opportunists?
12. What is their eternal punishment?
13. **Analyze:** Why does Dante place these souls chasing a blank banner?
14. What other punishment causes these souls constant pain?
15. What is the name of the ferryman of the Acheron?
16. Why does he not want to ferry Dante?

From Dante's *Inferno* (Translated by John Ciardi) Canto V: In the second circle of Hell Dante speaks to the spirits of Paolo and Francesca, a pair of famous lovers, caught up in the whirlwind of the lustful. Their response to Dante's summons is one of the poem's most famous passages.

Thus, as soon as the wind in its wild course 79
brought them around, I called: "O wearied souls!
if none forbids it, pause and speak to us."

As mating doves that love calls to their nest 82
glide through the air with motionless raised wings,
borne by the sweet desire that fills each breast —

Line 82: Doves are a common symbol of love

Just so those spirits turned on the torn sky 85
from the band where Dido whirls across the air;
such was the power of pity in my cry.

Line 85: Dido, a character from Roman mythology, is a queen who commits suicide after she is rejected by the hero Aeneas

"O living creature, gracious, kind, and good, 88
going this pilgrimage through the sick night,
visiting us who stained the earth with blood,

were the King of Time our friend, we would pray His peace 91
on you who have pitied us. As long as the wind
will let us pause, ask of us what you please.

Line 91: "The King of Time" refers to God

The town where I was born lies by the shore 94
where the Po descends into its ocean rest
with its attendant streams in one long murmur.

Love, which in gentlest hearts will soonest bloom 97
seized my lover with passion for that sweet body
from which I was torn unshriven to my doom.

Line 97: Paolo and Francesca were contemporaries of Dante and began a secret love affair. The lovers were murdered by Paolo's brother, Francesca's husband.

Love, which permits no loved one not to love, 100
took me so strongly with delight in him
that we are one in Hell, as we were above.

Love led us to one death. In the depths of Hell 103
Caina waits for him who took our lives."
This was the piteous tale they stopped to tell.

Line 106: Francesca tells Dante that her husband (and murderer) has been sentenced to Caina, a region of lower Hell where sinners who committed crimes against their own family are kept.

And when I had heard those world-offended lovers 106
I bowed my head. At last the Poet spoke:
"What painful thoughts are these your lowered brow covers?"