

Teaching the *Inferno* in Wisconsin: A Guide for Educators

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How to Use this Guide

A note on context: Reading Across Time and Space

Dante's *Inferno* is a work of fiction. While its sociocultural and geopolitical contexts are integral to its impact, and to our critical reflections on the texts, it is important to remember that this is a work of literature and not a historical document. While literature can help us teach culture, history, psychology, current affairs, and so on, no one text can bear the burden of representing an entire nation, culture, or people.

How to Use this Guide

The material in this guide is intended to provide much of what you will need to teach the novel and its context. We believe that the historical and cultural background is necessary to understanding the novel, its characters, and their decisions, but we encourage you to teach the novel thematically, and tie it into other disciplinary issues and regular features of your core curriculum wherever possible.

Readings, reviews and handouts: The reviews and readings in the guide are intended for teachers, but some of them may also work well as student handouts. These include readings that provide further background information for instructors as well as a variety of materials (especially from the internet) that might aid instructors in creating handouts, for example. You are encouraged, where possible, to use the materials in this guide as handouts for your students.

Lesson plans and suggestions for discussion: The lesson plans and activities provided in this guide are designed to allow you the opportunity to tailor the way you teach the text to your own course, time constraints, interests, and goals. The individual units could be taught over one or several days or weeks, and you can mix and match ideas from the various sections to create your own syllabus.

Focused Reading: Although the guide assumes that one has read the entire novel, most units include specific passages for a focused reading—an area of the text from which the major ideas and themes of that unit are drawn and which can serve as an example of the major concepts discussed.

Close Reading Strategies

Most of the lesson plans include *focused readings*, which are passages from the novel that illustrate a certain theme or idea for that particular unit. During discussion and for assignments, students should be encouraged to support their interpretations with evidence from the text. Close reading lends itself well to group work and to small-group discussions, and is an excellent way for students to learn both critical thinking and analysis skills as they make connections, use evidence to support their views, and discuss the impact of various literary techniques. For close reading to work successfully, it's important that the teacher

always remind the students to point to the passage/line/occurrence that supports their position as they share their ideas. Close reading teaches students the difference between “opinion” or “personal reaction” and “analysis.” It also helps teach students to assess the texts of its own merits, and avoid essentializing the cultural components of the text or stereotyping based on generalizations.

Reading a portion of text out loud as a class or small group, followed by group analysis, can be an excellent way to develop close reading skills in the classroom.

The guide also includes a [handout on close reading](#) that we encourage you to use in your classes.

For Further Information

If you have any questions about this guide, or would like additional information on any of the materials here, please contact the Great World Texts coordinator at greattexts@humanities.wisc.edu.

Dante's *Inferno*: General Questions and Approaches

General considerations and questions for reading the *Divine Comedy*

The *Divine Comedy* is many different works all rolled up in one: it is an encyclopedia, an autobiography of a soul, a prophetic vision, a summa, an epic journey, an extended love lyric, a quest for knowledge, and so on. It is a poem of sin and redemption, of crime and punishment, of damnation and salvation--of human actions and their eternal consequences as seen within the Divine Plan of the perfectly ordered universe. In the *Inferno* the operation of Divine Justice is observed in the *contrapasso*, the law of just retribution for a sin, which assumes a form appropriate to the sin itself. From the early fourteenth century to the present the poem has been the object of intensive study and extensive commentary.

Consider the general questions of overall design, of numerical proportions, of symmetries that can be observed in the work as a whole. What is the *Divine Comedy*? What is its structure? What is its subject? The metrical scheme--*terza rima* "third rhyme"--was invented by Dante for his poem: how does the rhyme scheme convey the essence of the poem itself and provide a guide to our reading of the poem?

The themes of the poem are many: the quest, conversion, love, friendship, freedom, etc. The poem represents the synthesis of the heroic epic, the courtly romance, and the courtly lyric.

The *Divine Comedy* is an allegorical work and, as such, takes its place in a long literary and hermeneutical tradition. What does "allegory" mean? What kinds of allegory are there? What works served as model for Dante? What does Dante say about allegory in his works (*Convivio*, *Letter to Can Grande*)?

Dante is very conscious of his predecessors and of his place in and contribution to the literary tradition--how does he engage the earlier literary tradition? What distinguishes the *Divine Comedy* from other allegorical works? Who are the characters in the poem? What constitutes the "action" of the poem? Is Dante a "realistic" author? How does he manifest his "realism"?

The importance of identifying subtexts and intertexts is crucial to our understanding of the poem. How is the *Divine Comedy* an epic? What are the major themes of the poem?

Questions to consider in reading a canto of the *Inferno*

What is the central theme/idea? Is there a "secret" word? Who are the characters? How does the canto work as a poetic, thematic, and aesthetic unit? How does the canto divide? How does it relate to the cantos that precede and follow it? What is the sin presented in the canto? How is the sin punished? What is the nature of the *contrapasso*? What sorts of imagery are present? What metrical devices or rhetorical figures are employed?

Various critical approaches that may be used in our study of the *Divine Comedy*

moral/allegorical
archetypal/typological

psychological
political
aesthetic/stylistic
historical
linguistic
intertextual
interdisciplinary
philosophical/theological
feminist
socio/cultural
narratological
deconstructionist
mythological
anthropological

Points of particular interest in the cantos under discussion

Inferno 1

The first canto as introductory to the entire work: the foundation of Dante's poetic edifice
The first tercet signals Dante's revolutionary poetic stance
The "historical" date of the poem
"Moral" topography, "allegorical" landscape, and the eschatological shape of the poem
Dante the Poet and Dante the Pilgrim
The Pilgrim's infirmity: the "piè fermo"
The three beasts and their identity
The appearance of Virgil and the reasons for his selection as the Pilgrim's guide
The prophecy of the Veltro
The importance of conversion and movement
Virgil's understanding of God and the afterlife
The epic character of the poem (voyage/quest; great deeds; action begins *in medias res*)
The rhetorical device of *hysteron-proteron* as central to the conceptual framework of the entire poem

Inferno 2

The invocation to the Muses
Roadblock: at the start of the canto a problem arises that must be resolved before the journey can begin: the nature of Dante's election and mission
The heavenly court and the gracious ladies who form the "chain of grace"
The Virgilian subtext: *Aeneid* IV, 271ff (Mercury urges Aeneas to action)
Courtly lyric and epic action
The function of rhetoric: Virgil's "parola ornata" and Beatrice's "vere parole"

Inferno 3

The words above the Gate of Hell: who is their Author? What do these words signify?
The Pilgrim's initial impression of Hell
The identity of the souls in the Vestibule
The identity of "the one who made the great refusal" (vv. 59-60): "figural density"?
The figure of Charon and his responsibility: compare with his classical prototype
The formula "Vuolsi così..." ("It is so willed...") (vv. 95-96)

The Virgilian subtext (*Aeneid* VI, 309-10) for the image of the leaves in autumn that fall from the tree (vv. 112-114) and the importance of this image in Dante's text

Inferno 4

What is the atmosphere of the first circle of Hell: this is Virgil's "home"

The history and doctrine of the Harrowing of Hell

The meeting with the poets: the "triumph" of the Dante the Pilgrim

The symbolism of the noble castle, its river, and the hemisphere of light

The epic catalogue of virtuous pagans and its Virgilian subtext: *Aeneid* VI, 752ff (Anchises shows his son the future glories of Rome)

Chromatic symbolism and the *locus amoenus*

Inferno 5

The figure and office of Minos

The significance of the seven carnal sinners named by Virgil (Semiramis, Dido, etc.)

The image of the doves (vv. 82-84)

The meeting with Francesca and Paolo: the end of the courtly love tradition

The clash between human and divine perspectives (v. 109)

The perils of reading and the purpose of literature

Dante's swoon: the "failure" of the Pilgrim

Inferno 6

The office and function of Cerberus: the nature of infernal guardians

Ciacco's language and imagery: gluttony and the body politic of Florence

Political prophecy and the end of time

Inferno 7

The characterization of Plutus

The motif of garbled speech

What is avarice? What is prodigality?

The goddess Fortuna and her operation: the classical and Christian heritage

Dante's notion of tragedy

The rivers of Hell

The identity of the souls at the bottom of the Styx: the slothful? or the wrathful?

What is wrath?

Inferno 8

The function of the mysterious tower

The figure of Phlegyas and his office

The dramatic encounter with Filippo Argenti: subjectivity and objectivity

Biblical intertexts: the limits of anger (*bona ira* and *mala ira*)

The characterization of the City of Dis

Roadblock: the confrontation at the gate and the dramatic tension that ensues

Inferno 9

The continuing tension: the limits of human reason and the necessity of divine grace

The allegorical significance of the three Furies and the Medusa
The crucial tercet: vv. 61-63
The allegorical significance of the coming of the divine messenger (*Messo*)
How is the sixth circle described?

Inferno 10

What is heresy?
Life and death in Florence and in Hell: Farinata and Cavalcante
The differing character of Farinata and Cavalcante: their individual obsessions
Dante's relationship to Farinata and Cavalcante? How does the Pilgrim interact with them?

Inferno 11

The catalogue of sin and the ordering of the *Inferno*

Inferno 13

The description of the wood of the suicides
The Harpies: the transformation in the nature of the infernal guardians
The Virgilian subtext (*Aeneid* III, 39ff) for the breaking of the branch
The use of language to create a mood: stylistic criticism
Pier delle Vigne's tragic flaw and the motivation for his suicide
The spendthrifts and their different end
The anonymous Florentine suicide: why included?

Inferno 15

Brunetto Latini: the role of the teacher and civic leader
Fathers and sons: Brunetto Latini and prophecy
The importance of literature and its ability to confer immortality
The nature of the sin punished in this region of Hell

Inferno 19

The abrupt opening of the canto with the invective against Simon Magus
What is simony and how is it presented in this canto?
The encounter with Pope Nicholas III and its relationship to the visual arts
The Donation of Constantine and its effect on medieval civilization

Inferno 26

The invective against Florence
The guiding image of Elijah--ascent and apotheosis--and its reversal in the descent and damnation of Ulysses
The crimes of Ulysses and Diomed
Ulysses's story of his last voyage: heroic or misguided action?

Inferno 34

The lowest region of Hell: Judecca
Textual adaptation: the first verse of the canto and Fortunatus's hymn
The arch-traitors and the symbolism of their punishment

Lucifer as the "Anti-Trinity": the culmination of Hell
Dante's geography and the passage from Hell to Purgatory

Unit 1: Background and Context

Goal

Familiarize the students with the historical context, the author and the book.

Introductory Discussion

Suggested prompts

- What do you mean when you say “Middle Ages?”
- What does “Middle Ages” make you think about?
- Can you list one or two things that you associate with the Middle Ages?
- Where did people live? How?

- What does “inferno” mean?
- What is hell? Who goes to hell? Why? Who believes that?

- What do you think a medieval book entitled *Inferno* is about?
- What do you think the story is about?
- How do you expect this book to be? Can you list one or two adjectives that express your expectations for what you are going to read?

- Does anyone know who Dante was?
- When did he live, where?

Lecture

For the Teacher: Prepare your remarks by reading Durling’s introduction to the text and the entry by Lino Pertile in *Cambridge History of Italian*, see “General Instructions.” The students should read the following set of questions before the lecture and then organize their notes accordingly. Your lecture should address the following questions:

About the Author and his Time

- Where is Italy? Where is Florence? Where was Dante schooled?

- Who were the Ghibellines and the Guelfs? What political party did Dante belong to?
- What sparked the rivalry between the White and Black Guelfs?

- Where was the author during the composition of his work and what was his occupation?

- Where did Dante go when he was exiled?

- What is the *Vita Nuova* (New Life)? Who is Beatrice?

About the book entitled *The Divine Comedy*

- What is the original title of the book?
- How many canticles does the whole text include?
- How many cantos (songs) does the *Inferno* contain?
- How many cantos do the other canticles include?
- Where is the original manuscript?
- Was the work well-known in Dante's lifetime?

In-class Reading Activity

About the text

How should we read Dante's text? Fortunately, Dante tells us how to read his text in much detail in a letter he wrote between 1316 and 1320 to Can Grande della Scala, the Lord of Verona, Italy. The letter is a summary of the medieval debate on a reading technique called "allegory." The meaning of this word should be clarified with the use of a dictionary before getting into the letter.

Pre-reading questions (to keep in mind while reading):

1. To which work does the letter talk about?
2. What does "polysemous" mean?
3. How many meanings does Dante propose for the passage from the Bible? What are they?

Reading: Letter to Can Grande della Scala

§ 7. [T]he meaning of this work is not of one kind only; rather the work may be described as 'polysemous', that is, having several meanings; for the first meaning is that which is conveyed by the letter, and the next is that which is conveyed by what the letter signifies; the former of which is called literal, while the latter is called allegorical, or mystical. And for the better illustration of this method of exposition we may apply it to the following verses: 'When Israel went out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language; Judah was his sanctuary, and Israel his dominion'. For if we consider the letter alone, the thing signified to us is the going out of the children of Israel from Egypt in the time of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption through Christ is signified; if the moral sense, the conversion of the soul from the sorrow and misery of sin to a state of grace is signified; if the anagogical, the passing of the sanctified soul from the bondage of the corruption of this world to the liberty of everlasting glory is signified. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may one and all in a general sense be termed allegorical, inasmuch as they are different (*diversi*) from the literal or historical; for the word 'allegory' is so called from the Greek *alleon*, which in Latin is *alienum* (strange) or *diversum* (different).

§ 8. This being understood, it is clear that the subject, with regard to which the alternative meanings are brought into play, must be twofold. And therefore the subject of this work must be considered in the first place from the point of view of the literal meaning, and next from that of the allegorical interpretation. The subject, then, of the whole work, taken in the literal sense only, is the state of souls after death, pure and simple. For on and about that the argument of the whole work turns. If, however, the work be regarded from the allegorical point of view, the subject is man according as by his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will he is deserving of reward or punishment by justice.

Mini-Quiz

What is the original title of the book?

- a) La divina commedia (The Divine Comedy)
- b) La commedia [di Dante Alighieri] (The Comedy [of Dante Alighieri])
- c) Inferno (Hell)

How many canticles does the text include?

- a) 100
- b) 34
- c) many
- d) countless

How many cantos does the Inferno contain?

- a) 100
- b) 101
- c) 34
- d) 33

Where is the original manuscript?

- a) Vatican Library, Rome
- b) Newberry Library, Chicago
- c) Personal Collection, Prof. Christopher Kleinhenz, University of Wisconsin-Madison
- d) Location Unknown

Was the work well-known in Dante's lifetime?

- a) yes, it was known among intellectuals and illiterates
- b) yes, it was known only among intellectuals
- c) no, it was an obscure work, discovered in the 1600s

Where was the author during the composition of his work and what was his occupation?

- a) Courtier, the Medici Court in Florence
- b) Political exile hosted by friends in Padua, Venice, Verona, Ravenna
- c) Bishop of Florence

Who is Beatrice?

- a) Dante's wife

- b) an angel
- c) Dante's muse

T/F Dante's *Commedia* is an allegorical text.

For the teacher: Have students compare answers in groups of 2 or more.

Homework Assignment I

- Think of an event in your life that was particularly difficult or particularly wonderful.
- Describe this event as if it were a walk, the weather and a plant.
- Write 2-3 sentences for each.
- Be prepared to share your allegorical descriptions of this event with the class.

**You need not reveal the specific details to your classmates, nor should you feel obliged to respond should they guess!

Unit 2: The Protagonists and the Story of the *Inferno*

Goal

Introduce the students to the text of Canto 1, its main characters and difficulties. Familiarize the students with the method of close reading.

Introductory Discussion

Suggested prompts

- Do you know what an autobiography is? Have you ever read one? Which ones?
- What are the features of an autobiography? [*first-person narrative, pictures, etc.*]

- What is the point of writing an autobiography?
[*to share a personal experience, justify one's actions, convey the private story of a public event, etc.*]

- When does one write about himself/herself? How can one talk about his/her life?
[*verse/prose, metaphor/literal, oral/written, native language/adopted language*]

- What do you expect the writer of an autobiography to write about? How?
- The writer of the autobiography wants us to believe that s/he actually did what s/he writes s/he did. When the reader picks up an autobiography s/he enters into that pact.

- How do you think allegory affects an autobiography? What did you write about your personal experience (unit 1, homework)? Does anyone want to share his/her homework with the class?

[Ask for volunteers to share students' allegorical descriptions (Unit 1 Homework).]

Close-Reading Instructions

By close reading we mean the careful interpretation of a brief passage of text. As this reading emphasizes the particular over the general and pays a lot of attention to single words or ideas, it can be difficult to practice in class. Here, we suggest organizing the close-reading around a limited set of questions, a selection of which can be used to compose a handout. These questions are organized in "pre-reading questions," which emphasize the literal understanding of the text, and "post-reading questions," which are meant as prompts for interpretation or further discussion. In the middle, the teacher is given some hints to help the students arrive at the correct understanding of the literal meaning of the text.

Canto 1 Close Reading Questions

Pre-Reading	Teacher Hints (verses)	Post-Reading Activity
<i>In the Dark Wood</i>		
1. How old was Dante?	1	Writing about a personal experience (see unit 1). When is the text written and when does the narrative take place?
2. Where was he?	2	Describe/Draw the geography of Canto 1
3. Why did he arrive there?	3, 11-12	Discuss the allegorical meaning of the wood, path and hill.
4. How did he feel?	6, 13-14, 19, 21, 28, 58	
5. Why is he writing this book?	8-9	
6. How did he arrive in the wood?	10-12	Discuss the allegorical meaning of the “straight” or “true” way.
7. What does he compare himself to?	22-24	
<i>Encounter with the Three Beasts and Virgil</i>		
8. Who/What does Dante encounter?	Leopard: 31-36 Lion: 44-48 She-wolf: 49-54 Virgil: 61-136	Allegoric interpretation of the beasts and of Virgil. What is allegory? How does it work? How does it apply to this section of the canto?
9. What happens to Dante during these encounters?	34-36, 44-48, 49, 54, 61-136	What is a “shade” as opposed to a “true man”?
10. How does Dante tell us the time and the season?	37-40, refer to endnote	
11. Where is Virgil from?	68-69	
12. When was Virgil born?	70	
13. Where did he live and when?	70-72	
14. What was Virgil’s profession?	73, 79-80	
15. What does Virgil ask Dante?	76-78	
16. What tone does Dante use with Virgil? Why? How does Dante feel about him?	79-87; 92	
17. What advice does Virgil	92-99; 112-120	

give to Dante? Why? Where does he offer to lead him? What will he see?		
<i>Prophecy of the Greyhound</i>		
18. What is the animal Virgil refers to?	101-105	
19. What purpose will the coming of the fourth beast fulfill?	106-108	Discussion of slide D190: Inferno 1, Tom Phillips: the Veltro [slide D190]
20. Who died for Italy? Where do these characters come from?	106-108 and endnote	What is Virgil's book?
21. What will the greyhound do?	109-111	Why must Italy be saved?
22. To whom will Virgil entrust Dante when he departs?	121-123	Who is this woman?
23. Why must Virgil entrust Dante to someone else?	124-129	Why isn't Virgil a Christian?
24. Is Virgil a "saved" soul?	71-72, 125, 131,	Compare Virgil's birth date to the dates of Christ.
25. Why does Dante wish to take the journey?	130-135	

Homework Assignment

Dante's *Commedia* has been translated into many languages over the years. Imagine that some day in the future the opening line were mistranslated as "In the middle of the journey of *my* life/ I came to myself in a dark wood/ for the straight way was lost." How would this mistranslation affect interpretation of the work?

For the teacher:

The idea behind this assignment is to understand the way Dante assigns a universal meaning to a personal experience. By using *our*, he presents himself as an Everyman or representative of mankind. A synthetic outline of this problem can be found in the additional note "Autobiography in the *Divine Comedy*," on page 551 of the Durling edition.

Other Readings / Activities / Games

1. What is *terza rima*? (See Durling pages 20-23.) After researching *terza rima*, try writing 6-12 lines in English using the rhyme scheme of *terza rima*.
2. **Thinking Allegorically:** This game was invented to develop the metaphorical skills that everyone possesses. Its goal is to show that everyone can be a poet.

Directions: Two or more people are required to play the game. Player One thinks of an object, for example a flower. The other players have to think of another object (for example, a teacup) and ask Player One to describe himself as this object using the features of the object he has privately chosen (i.e., a flower). Player One must describe himself as a teacup while offering clues that indicate he is a flower.

Example: Player One says, "I am a teacup. I smell sweetly. I am painted in lively colors. I am filled with tea and honey that attracts bees. I sit on the table, but I prefer the garden."

Example 2: "I am a skyscraper that makes you dream all night. I am a skyscraper that everybody needs. I am not only in big cities, but everywhere. My walls are soft and colored. My inhabitants are many, light and white." (answer: a pillow)

Unit 3: Premise and Outcome of Dante’s Journey

Goal

Provide the students with a basic understanding of the story told in Dante’s text, its premises and outcomes.

Introductory Discussion

Suggested prompts

- Why do think Dante finds himself in hell?
- Who sent him there?
- Who asked Virgil to be his guide during the journey?
- What do Dante and Virgil have in common?

- Does Dante have a mission to accomplish during his journey?
- What do you think he has to do?
- For whom is he writing what he saw?

- Where do you think hell is?
- How do you think it is organized?
- Who is the director?
- Who decided to institute hell?
- Where is its entrance?
- Where is its exit?

Canto 2: Reasons for the journey; Beatrice’s intercession

Close-Reading Instructions

(see Unit 1)

Canto 2 Close-Reading Questions

Pre-Reading	Teacher Hints (verses)	Post-Reading Activity
<i>Fears</i>		
1. What time of day is it?	1-3	
2. What does Dante rely on to tell the story of his journey?	5-8	Who are the Muses? How are the Muses related with memory?
3. What is Dante’s concern about taking the journey?	10-36	
4. Who else has undertaken the journey to the underworld before Dante? How does he feel compared to these people?	Aeneas: 13 St. Paul: 28 31-36	Who are Aeneas and St. Paul? When and why did they visit the afterlife?
5. Having considered such	37-42	

illustrious predecessors, how does Dante feel about undertaking the trip?		
6. In Virgil's view, what is really preventing Dante from undertaking his journey? How does he try to free Dante from fear?	43-51	
7. Who asked Virgil to take care of Dante? What's her relationship with Dante? Where does she reside? What will Virgil receive in exchange for his help?	58-75	Read a few poems from Dante's book about his love for Beatrice, the <i>Vita Nuova</i> .
8. How does Virgil feel about the request? What is the tone of his answer to Beatrice?	76-81	
9. Who are the other people involved in the Dante case? According to Beatrice's account, who asked Lucia to intercede on behalf of Dante?	94-99	
10. What did Lucia ask Beatrice to do? Why?	103-109	
11. Why, according to Virgil, could Dante not take the path up the mountain?	118-120	
After reporting the speeches of Beatrice and Lucia, what does Virgil incite Dante to do?	121-126	
What does Dante compare himself to?	127-132	Why does Dante compare himself to a flower? What does the choice of this comparison mean?
How does Virgil's speech affect Dante?	133-140	

Lecture

Geography and structure of Dante's world

For the teacher:

Prepare using Durling's introduction to the text and/or Pertile's entry in the *Cambridge History of Italian Literature* (see "General Instructions"). The students are supposed to read a set of questions before the lecture and then organize their notes accordingly. Also, the students should be given a map of Dante's world and a map of hell to follow during the reading. The lecture should address the following questions:

1. Where does Dante place the gate of Hell? Where does he place its exit?
2. How is Dante's hell organized? To which criterion does the hierarchy of sinners respond? What is the worst sin punished in Hell? What is the least severe?
3. Which are the rivers of hell? What do their names mean?
4. Who are the guardians of hell? What are their names? Where do they stay?
5. Who stays at the bottom of hell? Why?
6. What lies above hell?

Slides

1. [Map](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/maps/12citaly.jpg) of Italy at the time of Dante [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/maps/12citaly.jpg]
2. The [structure](https://www2.bc.edu/zachary-allen/Dante2.html) of Dante's Hell [https://www2.bc.edu/zachary-allen/Dante2.html]
3. The [structure](http://frit.lss.wisc.edu/~kleinhenz/lt253/protected/d159.jpg) of Hell in a medieval manuscript [http://frit.lss.wisc.edu/~kleinhenz/lt253/protected/d159.jpg]
4. The [topography](http://frit.lss.wisc.edu/~kleinhenz/lt253/protected/d160.jpg) of Hell and Purgatory in a medieval manuscript [http://frit.lss.wisc.edu/~kleinhenz/lt253/protected/d160.jpg]

Close Reading Questions for Canto 34: Exit from Hell

<i>Climbing the body of Satan</i>		
When does Virgil hold on the furry sides of Satan's body?	34: 71-72	
What does Virgil do when they get to where the thigh is hinged?	34: 79-81	
Why are Virgil and Dante climbing on Satan's body?	34: 82-84	
Through what do Virgil and Dante get out of hell?	34: 85	
How do the poets see Satan-Lucifer once they are out of hell?	34: 88-89	Why does Lucifer look turned upside down once Virgil and Dante are out of hell?

What time is it when Virgil and Dante get out of hell?	34: 95 (the time is 8:30 am; see endnote for details)	
What surprises Dante once he emerges on the southern hemisphere of the world? How does Virgil resolve this doubt?	34: 103-105 34: 109-113	
What time is it in Hell? What time is it in the southern hemisphere?	34:118	
Where does the hidden path lead to? What does Dante see through a round opening?	34: 134 34: 137	
What do Dante and Virgil see once they are out of Hell?	34:139	How do all the three canticles of the <i>Commedia</i> end?

Homework

1. Reread carefully the conversation between Beatrice and Virgil. Imagine that Virgil was not so eager to carry out Beatrice's request. How would he have replied? Write a monologue of ten sentences.
2. Imagine Dante were traveling through Wisconsin. How could the geography and landscape of Wisconsin be interpreted as Hell? Draw or describe your modern Hell.

Unit 4: The Structure of Hell and the Punishment of Sinners, Part A

Goal

To help students visualize the fictional world created by Dante’s text and the standard pattern of Dante’s encounters: entrance, observation, and contact with damned souls.

Introductory Discussion

How do you imagine Hell? Where is Hell? What is it like? Does Hell exist?

How does Dante imagine Hell? Where does he situate it? How are the damned located in hell? Where are the worst punishments and sinners?

How do you think the damned are punished in Dante’s hell? What do you expect to find where, say, the lustful are gathered? What is lust? What is it an excess of? Can you find on the map the circle of lust?

Close Reading Questions for the following selections:

- **Canto 3: 1-30, 70-108**
- **Canto 5: 1-51, 73-142**

Pre-Reading	Teacher Hints (verses)	Post-Reading Activity
<i>Entering Hell</i>		
1. What is the text at the opening of Canto 3? Is it a reported speech? To whom or what does “me” refer?	Canto 3: 1-30	Observation and discussion of slides D195-D219.
2. Which of the five senses are involved in the opening of Canto 3?		
3. What is the name of the river?	Canto 3: 78	
4. How do the souls cross it?	Canto 3: 82-84	
5. Who helps the souls cross?	Canto 3: 82, 94	

Contrapasso: Paolo and Francesca

6. In which direction does Dante move?	Canto 5: 1-3	Outline/Discuss the Circles of Hell and the categorization of sinners. Refer to the map in Durling, p. xvi.
7. What does Minos do? What purpose does his action serve?	Canto 5: 4-12	Draw the beast Minos. Sides D228-233
8. What does Minos say?	Canto 5: 16-20	
9. What does Virgil instruct Minos to do?	Canto 5: 23-25	
10. What is the weather like?	Canto 5: 28-33	
11. Which sinners can be found in this part of Hell?	Canto 5: 38	
12. How are these sinners punished?	Canto 5: 40-51, 134-135	Slides 234-239
13. How does Dante summon two of the souls?	Canto 5: 76-81	
14. To what does Dante compare the pair of sinners?	Canto 5: 82-87	Bestiary
15. How do the sinners address Dante?	Canto 5: 88	
16. What is Dante's attitude toward Paolo and Francesca?	Canto 5: 92, 109-120,	
17. What happened to the two souls?	Canto 5: 103-6, 121-138	Slides 240-247
18. What is the <i>galeotto</i> ?	Canto 5: 136-138	Knights of the Round Table, Lancelot and Guinevere, see endnote
19. What happens to Dante at the end of Canto 5?	Canto 5: 139-142	

In-class Reading Activity

Pre-reading questions

1. According to what law is the punishment assigned to the damned?
2. How does this law work in Hell? Does it change in Purgatory?
3. Did Dante invent the *contrapasso*?
4. What do the damned fulfill in Hell?

The *Contrapasso*

“Christian justice operates throughout Dante’s afterlife ensuring that nothing in it is gratuitous or arbitrary. Assigning every soul to its appropriate place is the rigorous law of *contrapasso* (Inferno 28: 142), a retributive principle whereby everyone must suffer in the afterlife according to the sin he or she has committed on earth. This suffering is retributive and eternal in Hell, whilst in Purgatory it is remedial and temporary. In Paradise, too, the situation of the blessed is closely related to their earthly behavior: by appearing in different spheres, they are shown to receive the quality and measure of reward appropriate to each of them. Thus, God’s justice is done, and is seen to be done, in all three realms of the afterlife.

The *contrapasso* is not Dante’s invention. What distinguishes its appearance in the *Commedia* is that it functions not merely as a form of divine revenge but rather as the fulfillment of a destiny freely chosen by each soul during his or her life. Thus, in Dante’s afterlife, far from being canceled, diminished or even altered, the historical identity of each soul is revealed in its very essence and so is intensified. Each individual is fixed in the other world as he or she really was, beneath all appearances, in this. In Hell the damned are forever petrified in the penitent continue and fulfill the process of repentance they began on earth. In Paradise the blessed enjoy the measure of happiness appropriate to the merits and capacity which characterized them while living. Thus, in Dante’s hands, the *contrapasso* works simultaneously as an instrument of justice and a powerful narrative device.”

Adopted from:

Pertile, Lino. “Dante.” *Cambridge History of Italian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. pp.63-64

Homework

1. Re-read the episode of Paolo and Francesca in Canto Five. In the passage (v. 121-138) we only hear Francesca’s account of their love story. Try to imagine Paolo’s version of the story. How does he feel about what happened? Does he completely agree with Francesca’s account? Does he blame the book (*galeotto*, v.136-137) for their love affair? Write a paragraph in Paolo’s voice that gives his side of the story.
2. Consult a map of Dante’s *Inferno* (page xvi in the Durling edition) and read the following explanation of the *contrapasso*. How are sinners divided? What are the topographical features

of Hell? If Hell were your town, where would you place the different categories of sinners? How would you punish Paolo and Francesca?

For the teacher:

The second homework assignment seeks to help students understand the idea of the *contrapasso*. Please see the endnote 52 for Canto 3 as well as 142 for Canto 28 for a full explanation. (pages 65 and 142 in Durling's edition).

Unit 5: The Structure of Hell and the Punishment of Sinners, Part B

Goal

To help students visualize the fictional world created by Dante’s text and the standard pattern of Dante’s encounters: entrance, observation, contact with damned souls.

Introductory Discussion

If Unit 4 was completed, review the concepts of *contrapasso* and the structure of Hell, share homework assignments with the class.

If Unit 4 was not completed, use introductory discussion prompts from unit 4; use the in class reading activity from unit 4.

Suggested prompts

What does heresy mean? What does the dictionary say heresy means? What is the antonym of heresy (orthodoxy)? Why is heresy a sin? How do you think heresy is punished in Dante’s Hell?

Close-Reading Questions for the following selections:

- **Canto 7: 127-130**
- **Canto 8: 1-30, 65-87**
- **Canto 9: 34-63, 109-134**
- **Canto 10: 1-81**

Pre-Reading	Teacher Hints (verses)	Post-Reading Activity
<i>The Swamp Styx</i>		
1. What does the landscape look like?	Canto 7: 127-130, Canto 8: 12	Consider Dante’s questions about the flames (Canto 8: 4-6). What do you think the flames signal? (Arrival of Phlegyas’ boat.)
2. Who is the “sea of all wisdom”?	Canto 8: 10-12 (Virgil)	
3. Who drives the boat?	Canto 8: 19	Why is his shouting described as “useless”? Why is Phlegyas angry?
4. What does “bark” refer to?	Canto 8: 28	
<i>The City of Dis</i>		
5. What does Dante see from a distance in the city of Dis?	Canto 8: 67-70	
6. To what part of Hell does the city of Dis lead?	Canto 8: 74-75	
7. How does Dante qualify the city? Why?	Canto 8: 77	
8. Who does Dante see on the	Canto 8: 82-83	

gate?		
9. Who are standing up on the summit of the tower of Dis?	Canto 9: 38-49	
10. Why would it be dangerous for Dante to see the Gorgon Medusa?	Canto 9: 52-53; 55-57	
<i>The sepulchers of the heretics</i>		
11. What is the plain full of? What are the tombs like?	Canto 9: 110-111; 115, 118, 121	Slides
12. Who are the people buried within the tombs?	Canto 9: 127-129	
<i>The encounter with the Epicureans 1</i>		
13. Can the damned people in the sepulchers be seen?	Canto 10: 7-9; 10-12	
14. What is the name of the damned soul Dante encounters? Where is he from?	Canto 10: 22, 25-26, 32	
15. What is the relationship between this damned soul and Dante's ancestors?	Canto 10: 46-49	
<i>The encounter with the Epicureans 2</i>		
16. What is this damned soul afraid of?	Canto 10: 67-69	What do you think is Dante's relationship with this soul? Who is Guido?

Homework

How do the damned souls see? Finish reading Canto 10 on your own paying special attention to verses 97-108. Who were the Epicureans? How are their beliefs represented in the *cantrapasso*? Use the endnotes to the canto and other resources to develop your answer. Present your findings in a couple of paragraphs.

Unit 6: The Structure of Hell and the Punishment of Sinners, Part C

Goal

To help students visualize the fictional world created by Dante’s text and the standard pattern of Dante’s encounters: entrance, observation, contact with damned souls.

Introductory Discussion

If Unit 4 and 5 were not completed, use introductory discussion prompts from unit 4.

If Unit 4 was completed prior to unit 6, review the concepts of *contrapasso* and the structure of Hell, share homework assignments with the class.

If Unit 5 was completed prior to unit 6, share Unit 5 homework and follow the discussion prompt below.

What does fraud mean? What does a fraudulent person do? How does fraud affect other people? Can you think of a fraudulent action?

Finish instructions

Close-Reading Questions for the following selections:

- **Canto 16: 103-1369**
- **Canto 17: 1-29, 79-136**
- **Canto 20: 1-30**
- **Canto 24: 79-96**
- **Canto25: 46-78**

Pre-Reading	Teacher Hints(verses)	Post-Reading Activity
Passage to the Eighth Circle (Simple Fraud)		
Where did Dante encounter the leopard?	1: 31-36 16: 106-108	
To whom does Dante give the cord wrapped around his waist? What does he do with the cord?	16: 109-114	Do you think the cord has an allegorical meaning? What do you think it is? (There is not one definitive interpretation of the passage, so you can speculate on it)
What does come up from	16: 124-136	

the pit? What does Dante say about his description? Does he present it as fiction or truth?		
<i>The flight on the back of the monster Geryon</i>		
Who pronounces the first three lines? What are the features of the beast?	17: 1-6	
What is the beast the image of? What does his face look like? What do his torso and tail look like?	17: 7-12	
What is painted on the beast's sides? With whom are the colors of its sides compared?	17: 16-18	Who was Arachne ? [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arachne]? Why do you think Dante refers to this literary figure? What has she done?
What does the beast's tail look like?	17: 25-27	
How are Dante and Virgil sitting on the beast's back? Why?	17: 80-84	
How does Dante feel about riding the beast? To whom does he compare himself?	17: 85-89	
What is the beast's name? What does Virgil ask it to do?	17: 97-100	
How does Dante describe the beast's movement? To what is it compared?	17: 100-105	Visual interpretation of Dante's text. Look at the illuminations (D311; D313). How do you think the painters understood this passage? Which representation is the most accurate?

How does Dante feel during the flight? To which mythological characters does he compare his state of mind?	17: 106-114	Who was Phaeton? Who was Icarus? How did they die? Why do you think Dante compare himself to these mythological figures? Phaeton [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaeton] Icarus [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Icarus_(mythology)]
Why does Dante become more afraid? What does he do?	17: 118-123	
What is Geryon's flight compared to? What does his flight look like?	17: 127-139	What were falcons used for? Does falconry still exist? Falconry [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falconry]
<i>Encounter with a group of fraudulent people: the diviners (pouch 4)</i>		
What does the "first canticle" refer to? What does the first canticle treat?	Unit 1 (About the Divine Comedy) 20: 1-3	
How are the people walking in the valley? What are they doing?	20: 4-9	
What do the bodies of these people look like? What happened to them?	20: 10-15	What is a litany? Who takes part in a litany? What does it look like? litany [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Litany]
What does Dante ask the reader to do? What happened to Dante?	20: 19-27	
What is Virgil's reaction toward Dante? How does Virgil refer to the damned of this circle?	20: 26-30	What do you think the diviners' <i>contrapasso</i> mean? Diviners [Slide D343]
<i>Encounter with another group of fraudulent people: thieves (pouch 7)</i>		
What is the pouch full of?	24:82	The seventh pouch according to the modern painter Guttuso [D379]
To what countries is this	24: 85-90	

pouch compared? Why?		
What are the people of this pouch doing? How do they interact with the snakes?	24: 91-96 24: 93 (endnote)	What is the legend of the Heliotrope? In what kind of medieval book were the properties of stones listed?
<i>Metamorphosis of a thief</i>		
Why would it be hard for a reader to believe what Dante says?	25: 46-48	
What kind of creature attacks one of the thieves?	25:49-51	Visual interpretations. What do you think these painters (1 , 2) [slides D382-383] added to Dante's description? What other monster do you think they had in mind?
How does the creature attack the thief? To what kind of plant is it compared?	25: 52-59	
What do the thief and the creature mix? What color do you think the creature is?	25: 61-66	
What happens to the two heads? What happens to the other parts of the body? What does the resulting creature look like?	25: 70-78	

Homework

1. Re-think the procedure of the *contrapasso*. If you were writing Dante's *Commedia*, how would you represent the punishment of the diviners and that of the thieves? Why? In writing your own *contrapasso*, you may start by listing a series of attributes that you associate with fortune-telling and theft; then you may associate them with an action; ultimately, you have to imagine an appropriate punishment for this action.
2. Re-read the passage from canto 17, in which Dante recounts his flight on the back of Geryon. It is hard to think that Dante had a personal experience in mind when describing the sensation of flying, but nothing is impossible. Try to imagine a short anecdote from Dante's life in which he experiences or he knows about flying.

Unit 7: The Structure of Hell and the Punishment of Sinners, Part D

Goal

To help students visualize the fictional world created by Dante’s text and the standard pattern of Dante’s encounters: entrance, observation, and contact with damned souls.

Introductory Discussion

If Unit 4 and 5 were not completed, use introductory discussion prompts from unit 4.

If Unit 4 was completed prior to unit 6, review the concepts of *contrapasso* and the structure of Hell, share homework assignments with the class.

If Unit 5 and six were completed prior to unit 6, share Unit 5 and Unit 6 homework and follow the discussion prompt below.

What does treason mean? How is it different from simple fraud? What is the difference between the victim of fraud and that of treason? Can you list the features of a traitor and imagine a *contrapasso* for him? What do you think the bottom of Dante’s hell should look like?

Close-Reading Questions for the following selections:

- **Canto 31: 115-145**
- **Canto 32: 124-139**
- **Canto 33: 1-78**
- **Canto 34: 1-69**

Pre-Reading	Teacher Hints (verses)	Post-Reading Activity
<i>Passage to the ninth circle (Treachorous Fraud)</i>		
1. What is the name of the giant?	31: 112	
2. Who speaks to the giant? What kind of deeds does he enumerate?	31:130 31: 115-129	
3. What does Virgil ask the giant to do? What does he promise to give the giant in exchange?	31: 121-123 31: 127 For the post-reading activity, you may look for gigantomachy [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gigantomachy]; and link it with the sin of pride and vainglory.	Why do you think Virgil uses flattery with the giant? Why do you think that giants care so much about fame and prestige?
4. How does Dante get on the giant’s	31: 134-135	

hand?		
5. To what is the giant's height compared?	31:136 The tower Garisenda (slide 424b) is in Bologna, Italy.	
<i>Encounter with traitors against party or city (Antenora)</i>		
6. Where are the two traitors? What are they doing to each other?	32: 124-130 Antenore [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antenor (Greek mythology)] was a Trojan who, according to medieval versions of the Iliad, betrayed his city and helped the Greeks to succeed.	Why is this section of the ninth circle named Antenora? Who was Antenor? What did he do to his city?
7. What does Dante ask one of the traitors to do? What does he promise in exchange?	32:133 32: 137-138	
8. Why is the traitor's meal "savage"? How does the traitor feel about recounting his story?	33: 1-3 33: 4-9	
9. Does the traitor know who Dante is? Does he know where he comes from? How?	33: 10-13	
10. What are the two traitors' names? Who is talking?	33:13-15	
11. What links the destinies of the two traitors? What does the traitor want to tell Dante about?	33: 16-19 33: 19-20	
12. What is the mew? Why is Ugolino there? What is the name of mew?	33: 22-24	
13. What does Ugolino dream	33: 28-36	Visual interpretation. Look at this illumination (slide d432).

about? At what time? To whom do the wolf and its little cubs refer? What happens to them?		How do you think the painter handled the different episodes of the story?
14. What were Ugolino's sons asking for? Why was Ugolino afraid at lunch time? What happens to the door of the mew?	33: 37-39 33: 43-45 33: 46-48	
15. What does Ugolino do to his hand? How do his sons interpret his gesture?	33: 58 33: 61-63	
16. When does the first of Ugolino's sons die? How many sons did he have?	33: 67 33: 70-73	
17.	33: 73-75	How do you interpret v. 75? What do you think Ugolino did to his sons?
<i>Encounter with traitors to lords and benefactors (Judecca)</i>		
18. What language does Virgil use at the beginning of canto 34? What is the effect of this choice?	34: 1-3	Why is this section of the ninth circle named Judecca? Who was Judas Iscariot? What did he do against Jesus?
19. What is the weather like in this section of Hell? How does Dante shelter himself?	34: 4-9	
20. How are the traitors trapped in this section of hell?	34: 10-15	What do you think is the meaning of the chaotic disposition of these souls?
21. What does Virgil want to show to Dante? How does	34: 16-21	What is the story of Satan or Lucifer [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/

he refer to this creature?		Lucifer]? Why is he in Hell? Whom did he betray?
22. How is Lucifer trapped in the ice? What is his aspect like? Why?	34: 28-31 34: 31-36	
23. How many faces does he have? What color are the faces?	34: 38; 34: 39, 43-44	
24. What are Lucifer's wings doing?	34: 52	
25. What are Lucifer's mouths doing? Who are the traitors in his mouths?	34: 55 33: 62-69 They betrayed and committed the assassination of Julius Cesar. As Dante links the Roman Empire to a divine design, the assassination is interpreted as a crime against God.	Who are Brutus and Cassius? Whom did they betray?

Homework

1. Dante's representation of Satan still influences the imagination of painters. In this [picture](#) [slide d448], the Italian painter Achille Incerti gives his own interpretation of Dante's description in a futuristic vein. What do you think Incerti's painting conveys about Satan? What does he associate the king of Hell with?
2. Re-read the passage in cantos 32 and 33 that present the tragic death of Ugolino and his sons. Try to divide it into its basic parts, and then rewrite it in the form of a newspaper article. Don't forget to write the headline, place, date. You may also create a picture.

What is Close Reading?

Close reading is a specific method of literary analysis, which uses the interpretation of a small piece of a text as a way to think about the whole. This kind of analysis invites readers to pay close attention to the effects of the specific words on the page. We ask ourselves *why* each word was chosen, *how* it contributes to the broader themes and ideas of the text, and *how* it interacts with the other words/images of the text.

There is no “right” way to analyze a text, but there are more and less convincing ways of interpreting different passages. The steps below will help you to persuasively close read a passage in a literary text:

1. Summary

Read the passage once without making any annotations. Start by asking yourself: what’s going on here? What is the speaker/character/narrator saying? Who is speaking? In what context? If you are unable to write a 1-2 sentence summary of the passage, read through again until you have a clearer idea. Don’t panic if you’re unsure, many texts are deliberately ambiguous or confusing; it is not always possible to say for definite what is happening.

2. Mood & Tone

The second time you read through, think about the overall mood created by the writing. Is it comic, tragic, sinister, serious? What is the tone of the writing: formal, playful, ironic? Does the writer use understatement or exaggeration?

3. Literary Devices

Circle/underline the specific words, images and literary devices which contribute to the mood and tone you have identified. These might include any of the following:

- Unusual vocabulary/word choice (archaic words, neologisms, foreign imports, slang/colloquialisms). Use an online dictionary such as www.askoxford.com if you need to look up words you don’t recognize.
- Symbols: does the writer use images which seem to represent something else?
- Metaphors and/or similes
- Striking comparisons or contrasts
- Personification
- Alliteration and/or onomatopoeia

4. Structure

Consider the overall “shape” of the passage you are analyzing. In the *Inferno*, does Dante use regular punctuation and sentence structures? What poetic forms does he employ? Is there dialogue in the piece? What is its effect?

5. Bigger Picture

Having considered these details, you can start to develop your overall interpretation of the passage. Consider the ways that your passage fits into the text as a whole. What do you think is the text's main message? How does it contribute to the broader themes of the work? How do the particular literary devices you have identified help to emphasize, intensify or undercut the other questions and issues that the text raises?