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On Dante's Divine Comedy: Inferno

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Divine Comedy: Inferno

By James Roberts and Nikki Moustaki

IN THIS BOOK

- Includes summaries and commentaries for all 34 cantos
- Provides insight into some of the mythological references throughout the poem
- Illuminates the meaning of numerology in the *Inferno* and how Dante used it
- Orients you geographically with the visual aid of a map—see the concentric circles of Hell
- Study the political climate of Dante's thirteenth-century Italy and how it is expressed in the *Inferno*
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This CliffsNotes study guide on Dante's *Divine Comedy: Inferno* supplements the original literary work, giving you background information about the author, an introduction to the work, a graphical character map, critical commentaries, expanded glossaries, and a comprehensive index, all for you to use as an educational tool that will allow you to better understand *Inferno*. This study guide was written with the assumption that you have read *Inferno*. Reading a literary work doesn't mean that you immediately grasp the major themes and devices used by the author; this study guide will help supplement your reading to be sure you get all you can from Dante's *Inferno*. CliffsNotes Review tests your comprehension of the original text and reinforces learning with questions and answers, practice projects, and more. For further information on Dante and *Inferno*, check out the CliffsNotes Resource Center.

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Table of Contents

LIFE AND BACKGROUND OF THE POET

The following abbreviated biography of Dante is provided so that you might become more familiar with his life and the historical times that possibly influenced his writing. Read this Life and Background of the Poet section and recall it when reading Dante's *Divine Comedy: Inferno*, thinking of any thematic relationship between Dante's work and his life.

Life and Background of the Poet

Dante was born in Florence in May 1265. His family was of an old lineage, of noble birth but no longer wealthy. His education was undoubtedly typical of all the youth of that time and station in life.

When he was only 12 years old, his marriage to the daughter of the famous Donati family was arranged, along with the amount of her dowry. These betrothals and marriages were family affairs, and Dante dutifully married her, some years later, at the proper time and had two sons and one daughter.

Dante studied at the University of Bologna, one of the most famous universities in the medieval world. There, he came under the influence of one of the most famous scholars of the time, Ser Brunetto Latini, who never taught Dante but advised and encouraged him. Latini appears in Canto XV of the *Inferno*.

When Dante was still very young, 10 to 12 years old, he met a 9-year-old girl at a prominent function. She wore a bright crimson dress, and to Dante, she radiated the celestial beauty of an angel. The girl was Beatrice, and there is no doubt that she was the great love of Dante's life, and the greatest single influence on his work. Dante loved her at a distance, and she was, most probably, totally unaware of Dante's devotion to her. He recorded this devotion in an early work *Vita Nuova (A New Life)*. Her name appears only once in the *Inferno*, but she plays an important role in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

Dante's public life began when he fought bravely in a battle at Campaldino in 1289. By 1295, he was completely involved in political causes, and was elected to the City Council that year. Florence, at that time, had two political parties: the Guelphs, who supported the pope as the ruler of the Catholic Church but believed that he should not be involved in secular affairs (that is a belief in the American concept of the separation of church and state); and the Ghibellines, who believed the pope should rule both secular and religious factions. As a member of the Guelph political party, Dante was sent often on missions to arrange peace between the two warring parties. His opposition to the pope's interference to the unification of all the various city-states often brought him to be at odds with the reigning pope.

While on a mission to Rome to arrange a truce between the two parties, there trumped-up charges were made against Dante: He was charged with graft, intrigue against the peace of the city, and hostility

against the pope. He was fined heavily and ordered to report to the Council to defend himself.

Rightly so, he was fearful for his life, and he did not appear to answer the charges. A heavier penalty was imposed. All of his property was confiscated, he was sentenced to be burned at the stake if caught, and his two sons were banished with him. In 1302, he was exiled from his native city, never to return.

At first he joined other political exiles, but he found them too stupid and selfish. It is not known where he spent many of his years in exile, but he was often well received. He began his great poem, the *Divine Comedy*, and it attracted a large and sympathetic audience. Commentaries flowed soon and, he became very well known. One of his hosts was the nephew to Francesca, who appears in Canto V of the *Inferno*.

He died in Ravenna on September 13, 1321, and he was buried with honors due him. Several times during the intervening years, the city of Florence has tried to get his remains returned to his native city, but not even the intercession of several popes could bring this about. His opinion of the citizens of his city was clearly stated in the full title of his greatest work, *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine by Citizenship, Not by Morals*. Dante still lies in the monastery of the Franciscan friars in Ravenna.

Background of the Poem

Throughout the Middle Ages, politics was dominated by the struggle between the two greatest powers of that age: the papacy and the Holy Roman Empire (HRE). Each claimed to be of divine origin and to be indispensable to the welfare of mankind. The cause of this struggle was the papal claim that it also had authority over temporal matters, that is, the ruling of the government and other secular matters. In contrast, the HRE maintained that the papacy had claim only to religious matters, not to temporal matters.

In Dante's time, there were two major political factions, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Originally, the Ghibellines represented the medieval aristocracy, which wished to retain the power of the Holy Roman Emperor in Italy, as well as in other parts of Europe. The Ghibellines fought hard in this struggle for the nobility to retain its feudal powers over the land and the people.

In contrast, the Guelphs, of which Dante was a member, were mainly supported by the rising middle class, represented by rich merchants, bankers, and new landowners. They supported the cause of the papacy in opposition to the Holy Roman Emperor.

The rivalry between the two parties not only set one city against another, but also divided individual cities and families into factions. In time, the original alliances and allegiances became confused in strange ways. Dante, as a Guelph, was a supporter of the imperial authority because he passionately wanted Italy united into one central state. In his time, the fighting between the two groups became fierce. Farinata, the proud Ghibelline leader of Florence, was admired by Dante, the Guelph, but Dante placed him in the circle of Hell reserved for Heretics. Dante's philosophical view was also a political view. The enemy was politically, philosophically, and theologically wrong—and thus a Heretic.

Virgil was considered the most moral of all the poets of ancient Rome. Virgil's *Aeneid* was one of the models for Dante's *Inferno*. It is said that Dante had memorized the entire *Aeneid* and that he had long revered Virgil as the poet of the Roman Empire, especially since the *Aeneid* tells the story of the founding of the Roman Empire. Furthermore, in Virgil's Fourth Eclogue, he writes symbolically about the coming of a Wonder Child who will bring the Golden Age to the world, and in the Middle Ages, this was interpreted as being prophetic of the coming of Christ. Thus in the figure of Virgil, Dante found a symbol who represented the two key institutions: the papacy and the empire, destined by God to save mankind.

INTRODUCTION TO THE POEM

The following Introduction section is provided solely as an educational tool and is not meant to replace the experience of your reading the work. Read the Introduction and A Brief Synopsis to enhance your understanding of the work and to prepare yourself for the critical thinking that should take place whenever you read any work of fiction or nonfiction. Keep the List of Characters and Character Map at hand so that as you read the original literary work, if you encounter a character about whom you're uncertain, you can refer to the List of Characters and Character Map to refresh your memory.

Introduction to the Poem

Reading Dante for the first time, the reader faces monumental problems: another society, another religion (medieval Catholicism is not the same as modern Catholicism), a different culture, and a different political system, where politics controlled the papacy, and the papacy was manipulating the politics of the times—and often the pope was a political appointment.

The Structure

The physical aspect of Hell is a gigantic funnel that leads to the very center of the Earth. (See the diagram later in this section.) According to the legend used by Dante, this huge, gigantic hole in the Earth was made when God threw Satan (Lucifer) and his band of rebels out of Heaven with such force that they created a giant hole in the Earth. Satan was cast all the way to the very center of the Earth, has remained there since, and will remain there through all of eternity.

The sinners who are the least repugnant, or those whose sins were the least offensive, are in the upper circles. In each circle, Dante chose a well-known figure of the time or from history or legend to illustrate the sin. As Dante descends from circle to circle, he encounters sinners whose sins become increasingly hateful, spiteful, offensive, murderous, and traitorous. He ends with Satan, eating the three greatest traitors in the world, each in one of his three mouths, at the center of the Earth.

The Punishments

Dante's scheme of punishment is one of the marvels of the imaginative mind; at times, however, it involves a rather complex and difficult idea for the modern reader.

Each sinner is subjected to a punishment that is synonymous with his or her sin—or else the antithesis of that sin. For example, the Misers and the Spendthrifts are in Circle IV. Their sins were that they worshipped money so much that they hoarded it, or the opposite, had so little regard for money that they spent it wildly. Nothing is so antagonistic to a miser as a spendthrift. Thus, their punishment is to bombard continually each other with huge stones expressing the antagonism between excessive hoarding and excessive squandering.

Another example is the Adulterous Lovers. In this world, they were buffeted about by their passions; in Hell, they are buffeted about by the winds of passion, as they eternally clasp each other. Those who deliberately committed adultery are in a much lower circle.

The punishment of the Thieves is simple in that their hands, which they used to steal, are cut off, and their bodies are entwined with snakes or serpents, as were encountered in Eden.

Allegory and Symbols

We follow the guide and Dante through adventures so amazing that only the wildest imagination can conceive of the predicament. Is this allegory or symbols? Most readers are anxious to have a one-to-one correlation between a thing and its symbolic equivalent: That is, a red rose equals love, and a white rose equals chastity. Thus, what do the beasts symbolize? There are so many different interpretations of their symbolic significance that each reader can assign a specific meaning, but basically suffice it to say that together they represent obstacles to Dante's discovering the true light on the mountain.

As an allegory, it is both simpler and more complicated than the symbolic meanings. This is a man's spirit on a journey through life and all of the lives that could prevent him from attaining ultimate salvation and a union with the Godhead, the source of all light. Those who failed during life are seen, in the *Inferno*, suffering from their sins in life, and Dante is thusly warned to avoid each and every sin to achieve salvation.

A Comedy?

Dante called his poem a *comedy*. In classic terminology, a comedy is a work that begins in misery or deep confusion and ends in elation or happiness. In Shakespearean comedy, the play often begins in confusion—couples breaking up or separating, but ends with everyone finding the right partner. In other words, a comedy is not something one would laugh about, but a movement from a low state of confusion to one where all people are combined for the greatest happiness.

The Structure of the Poem

Dante, like most people of his time, believed that some numbers had mystical meanings and associations. He designed the structure of his poem using a series of mystical numbers:

THREE: The number of the Holy Trinity: God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The number of parts of the *Divine Comedy*: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*. The number of lines in each verse of each canto. The number of divisions of Hell. The number of days required for Dante's journey through Hell.

NINE: A multiple of three; the number of circles in Hell.

TEN: The perfect number is the nine circles of Hell plus the vestibule.

THIRTY-THREE: A multiple of three; the number of cantos in each part.

NINETY-NINE: The total number of cantos plus Canto I, The Introduction.

ONE HUNDRED: A multiple of ten; considered by Dante to be the perfect number.

A Brief Synopsis

At the age of thirty-five, on the night of Good Friday in the year 1300, Dante finds himself lost in a dark wood and full of fear. He sees a sun-drenched mountain in the distance, and he tries to climb it, but three beasts, a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf, stand in his way. Dante is forced to return to the forest where he meets the spirit of Virgil, who promises to lead him on a journey through Hell so that he may be able to enter Paradise. Dante agrees to the journey and follows Virgil though the gates of Hell.

The two poets enter the vestibule of Hell where the souls of the uncommitted are tormented by biting insects and damned to chase a blank banner around for eternity. The poets reach the banks of the river Acheron where souls await passage into Hell proper. The ferryman, Charon, reluctantly agrees to take the poets across the river to Limbo, the first circle of Hell, where Virgil permanently resides. In Limbo, the poets stop to speak with other great poets, Homer, Ovid, Horace, and Lucan, and then enter a great citadel where philosophers reside.

Dante and Virgil enter Hell proper, the second circle, where the sinners of Incontinence begin. Here, the monster, Minos, sits in judgment of all of the damned, and sends them to the proper circle according to

their sin. Here, Dante meets Paolo and Francesca, the two unfaithful lovers buffeted about in a windy storm.

The poets move on to the third circle, the Gluttons, who are guarded by the monster Cerberus. These sinners spend eternity wallowing in mud and mire, and here Dante recognizes a Florentine, Ciacco, who gives Dante the first of many negative prophesies about him and Florence.

Upon entering the fourth circle, Dante and Virgil encounter the Hoarders and the Wasters, who spend eternity rolling giant boulders at one another.

They move to the fifth circle, the marsh comprising the river Styx, where Dante is accosted by a Florentine, Filippo Argenti, one amongst the Wrathful that fight and battle one another for eternity in the mire of the Styx. Dante wishes Argenti torn to bits and gets his wish.

The city of Dis begins Circle VI, the realm of the violent. The poets enter and find themselves in Circle VI, realm of the Heretics, who reside among the thousands in burning tombs. Dante stops to speak with two sinners, Farinata degli Uberti, Dante's Ghibelline enemy, and Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti, father of Dante's poet friend, Guido.

The poets then begin descending through a deep valley. Here, they meet the Minotaur and see a river of boiling blood, the Phlegethon, where those violent against their neighbors, tyrants, and war-makers reside, each in a depth according to their sin.

Virgil arranges for the Centaur, Nessus, to take them across the river into the second round of circle seven, the Suicides. Here Dante speaks with the soul of Pier delle Vigne and learns his sad tale.

In the third round of Circle VII, a desert wasteland awash in a rain of burning snowflakes, Dante recognizes and speaks with Capaneus, a famous blasphemer. He also speaks to his beloved advisor and scholar, Brunetto Latini. This is the round held for the Blasphemers, Sodomites, and the Usurers.

The poets then enter Circle VIII, which contains ten chasms, or ditches. The first chasm houses the Panderers and the Seducers who spend eternity lashed by whips. The second chasm houses the Flatterers, who reside in a channel of excrement. The third chasm houses the Simonists, who are plunged upside-down in baptismal fonts with the

soles of their feet on fire. Dante speaks with Pope Nicholas, who mistakes him for Pope Boniface. In the fourth chasm, Dante sees the Fortune Tellers and Diviners, who spend eternity with their heads on backwards and their eyes clouded by tears.

At the fifth chasm, the poets see the sinners of Graft plunged deeply into a river of boiling pitch and slashed at by demons.

At the sixth chasm, the poets encounter the Hypocrites, mainly religious men damned to walk endlessly in a circle wearing glittering leaden robes. The chief sinner here, Caiaphas, is crucified on the ground, and all of the other sinners must step on him to pass.

Two Jovial friars tell the poets the way to the seventh chasm, where the Thieves have their hands cut off and spend eternity among vipers that transform them into serpents by biting them. They, in turn, must bite another sinner to take back a human form.

At the eighth chasm Dante sees many flames that conceal the souls of the Evil Counselors. Dante speaks to Ulysses, who gives him an account of his death.

At the ninth chasm, the poets see a mass of horribly mutilated bodies. They were the sowers of discord, such as Mahomet. They are walking in a circle. By the time they come around the circle, their wounds knit, only to be opened again and again. They arrive at the tenth chasm the Falsifiers. Here they see the sinners afflicted with terrible plagues, some unable to move, some picking scabs off of one another.

They arrive at the Circle IX. It is comprised of a giant frozen lake, Cocytus, in which the sinners are stuck. As they approach the well of circle nine, Dante believes that he sees towers in the distance, which turn out to be the Giants. One of the Giants, Antaeus, takes the poets on his palm and gently places them at the bottom of the well.

Circle IX is composed of four rounds, each housing sinners, according to the severity of their sin. In the first round, Caina, the sinners are frozen up to their necks in ice.

In the second round, Antenora, the sinners are frozen closer to their heads. Here, Dante accidentally kicks a traitor in the head, and when the traitor will not tell him his name, Dante treats him savagely. Dante hears the terrible story of Count Ugolino, who is gnawing the head and neck of Archbishop Ruggieri, due to Ruggieri's treacherous treatment of him in the upper world.