

The Inferno: The Giant Sheet o' Questions

Plot & Travels

Canto I

- 1) How do the Beasts behave towards Dante? What does Dante do in response?
- 2) What sort of "mission" does Virgil suggest Dante embark upon, and why?

Canto II

- 1) Why is it realistic for Dante to feel some trepidation about the journey he's about to embark on?
- 2) How does Virgil reassure Dante that he's a worthwhile candidate for the journey?

The Gate of Hell and the Vestibule

- 1) Why doesn't Charon want to let Dante go forward? How is Virgil able to win the two passage?
- 2) What happens to Dante at the end of Canto III, and why?

First Circle

- 1) What does Dante see in the First Circle that's almost breathtakingly beautiful? What does it symbolize, and why isn't he satisfied with it by the time he moves on?

Second Circle

- 1) How is Francesca able to speak to Dante if she's supposed to be suffering for all eternity?

Third Circle

- 1) Dante begins Canto VI by returning to consciousness after swooning. What did he experience in the Second Circle that caused him to pass out (yet again), and why did it affect him?

Fourth Circle

- 1) What does Virgil's successful confrontation with Plutus signify for, say, Florence?

Fifth Circle

- 1) Why is Canto VIII's conclusion particularly tense?

Sixth Circle

- 1) Describe the details of the Heavenly Messenger's appearance (from arrival to departure). Which earlier allusion does this scene recall?
- 2) What misunderstanding arises between Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti and Dante?
- 3) Why don't the poets immediately descend into the Seventh Circle? (Think about this from a symbolic standpoint as well...)

Seventh Circle

- 1) How do Dante and Virgil evade the Minotaur?
- 2) How are the poets able to cross Phlegethon? How are they able to cross the Burning Plain?

- 3) What area do the poets finally reach by the end of the Canto, and what does Virgil do when they get there?
- 4) How does Dante react to his flight aboard Geryon, and where is the beast taking the poets?

Eighth Circle

- 1) What's different about the way most of the sinners in Circle Eight behave towards Dante (relative to the sinners we've encountered before)?
- 2) Why are Dante and Virgil in danger while attempting to cross Bolgia Five?
- 3) What happens during the "Five Noble Thieves" encounter?
- 4) Why does Virgil yell at Dante while they're watching the Falsifiers in Bolgia Ten?
- 5) How does Virgil convince Antaeus to help the poets reach the Ninth Circle? What separates Antaeus from the other Giants?

Ninth Circle

- 1) How do the poets escape Hell? What's the symbolic significance of each aspect of their escape?

Characters & Figures

Canto I

- 1) What do the Leopard, Lion, and She-Wolf each represent?
- 2) Dante meets Virgil outside of the Dark Wood. What sort of significance would he have had for the poet?

Canto II

- 1) Why is Virgil allowed to leave Limbo?

The Gate of Hell and the Vestibule

- 1) Describe Charon, as well as his purpose. Which archetypal designation (i.e., Friendly Beast, Young Man from the Provinces) best applies to him?

First Circle

- 1) Why does Dante view Aristotle as the most important philosopher in the First Circle?
- 2) Who are the classical poets Dante meets? What did they write?

Second Circle

- 1) Describe Minos, as well as his backstory and function in Hell.
- 2) Dante hears Paolo and Francesca's story firsthand. What is their story, particularly when you reconcile Boccaccio's account with Raffa's?

Third Circle

- 1) Describe Cerberus, both in terms of characteristics and backstory/purpose.
- 2) Why does Ciaccio's final request interest us?

Fourth Circle

- 1) Why can't Dante recognize any of the sinners individually? Why does he regard them with more coldness than he did Homer, Francesca, or Ciaccio?
- 2) Describe Plutus, the Fourth Circle's Threshold Guardian. What does Virgil do to him?

Fifth Circle

- 1) Why is Phlegyas a fitting (if somewhat tragic) boatman of Styx, the Fifth Circle of Hell?
- 2) Why are the Rebellious Angels in Hell instead of in the Vestibule, and why do they look so monstrous?

Sixth Circle

- 1) Describe the physical features of the Furies, the Sixth Circle's Threshold Guardians (or Creatures of Nightmares). What separates Medusa from the Furies?
- 2) What did each of the three Furies symbolize individually?
- 3) Why was Farinata degli Uberti noteworthy, and why would he and Dante Alighieri be "natural enemies"?

Seventh Circle

- 1) Who are the Centaurs? Describe their physical features and their purpose, and explain how Chiron differs from Nessus.
- 2) Who are the Harpies, and how are they described?
- 3) Who was Pier delle Vigne? Why is he here?
- 4) What did Jacomo and Arcolano do, and how does Dante justify their presence in the Second Round when they didn't commit suicide?
- 5) Who was Capaneus? How did he die, and how was his death the model for the Blasphemers' punishment?
- 6) Who were Jacopo, Guido, and Tegghiaio?
- 7) Describe Geryon. What does he represent?

Eighth Circle

- 1) Why is Dante condemning Bologna through his portrayal of Venedico Caccianemico?
- 2) Explain why Jason has been punished as a Seducer rather than honored as a hero.
- 3) Why does Dante condemn Boniface and Clement (via Nicholas)?
- 4) What are the Malebranche?
- 5) Why did I call Vanni Fucci the "foulest of foul"?
- 6) Why does Dante see Ulysses as a villain instead of a hero?
- 7) Why was Guido da Montefeltro both a perpetrator of and victim of fraud?

- 8) How was Mosca dei Lamberti partly responsible for the Guelph-Ghibelline war?
- 9) Why has Bertrand de Born been separated from his head?
- 10) What important role did Sinon play in the Trojan War?

Ninth Circle

- 1) Identify the following characters: Camicon de' Pazzi, Bocca degli Abbati, Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini, Fra Alberigo, Judas Iscariot, Brutus & Cassius, and Satan.
- 2) What's the story behind the scene of cannibalism we witness in Canto XXXII?

Realms, Sins, & Punishments

The Gate of Hell and the Vestibule

- 1) What's inscribed above the Gate of Hell? What's the inscription's greater significance?
- 2) Which sort of realm do the poets enter once they pass through the gate? Why is that realm where it is?
- 3) Explain the contrapasso we see in the Vestibule. What does each aspect of the sinners' punishment symbolize?
- 4) What geographical landmark do Dante and Virgil reach after leaving the sufferers behind? What purpose does this landmark serve?

First Circle

- 1) Describe the First Circle's environment, and explain the contrapasso we see. What's different about the residents of this Circle (versus Hell's other occupants)?

Second Circle

- 1) Describe the Second Circle's environment, and explain the contrapasso we see. How does this Circle contrast with Limbo?

Third Circle

- 1) Describe the Third Circle's environment, and explain the contrapasso we see. Why are the souls freezing (why lie in slush?), and why can't they ever stay warm?
- 2) How were lust and gluttony related, aside from their common root as Sins of the She-Wolf?

Fourth Circle

- 1) Describe the Fourth Circle's environment, and explain the contrapasso we see. Why are the Hoarders and Wasters pushing rocks?

Fifth Circle

- 1) Describe the Fifth Circle's environment, and explain the contrapasso we see. How was the Wrathful's punishment an indictment of Florence's society? Why are the Sullen singing underwater?
- 2) Why does Dante turn Styx into a swamp, and what purpose does Styx serve in The Inferno?

Sixth Circle

- 1) Describe Dis. What does it look like from the outside, and what does it contain?
- 2) Describe the Sixth Circle's environment, and explain the contrapasso we see. What determines the severity of one's punishment here?
- 3) Heresy's a very broad category of sin, but Dante narrows his focus until we only see one aspect of it. Which aspect does Dante concentrate on, and why does he do so?
- 4) Why is fraud the worst sin in Dante's calculus? Why is incontinence the mildest?

Seventh Circle

- 1) Describe the environment of the Seventh Circle's First Round, and explain the contrapasso we see. What determines the severity of one's punishment here?
- 2) Describe the environment of the Seventh Circle's Second Round, and explain the contrapassos we see. How are the Squanderers punished relative to the Suicides?
- 3) Describe the environment of the Seventh Circle's Third Round, and explain the contrapassos we see. Why aren't the sinners all punished in the same way? Why are the Usurers guilty of Violence Against Art?

Eighth Circle

- 1) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia One. Why are the demons driving the sinners?
- 2) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Two. Why are the sinners in that specific environment?
- 3) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Three. Why are the sinners where they are, especially in the condition they're in? Is their current punishment permanent?
- 4) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Four. Why are the sinners walking with their heads turned backwards?
- 5) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Five. Why are the demons tearing at the sinners, and what's symbolic about the environment itself?
- 6) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Six. Why are the sinners wearing those robes? Why are some sinners staked to the ground?
- 7) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Seven. What are the three types/stages of punishment the thieves face, and what justifies each punishment?
- 8) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Eight. What's the specific reason we can't see the sinners?
- 9) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Nine. Why must the sinners face such a disgusting fate, and what's the point of "healing" them?
- 10) Explain the contrapasso we see in Bolgia Ten. Why are Bolgia Ten's sinners punished via a "Grab Bag" approach – every sort of retribution that Dante can dream up?
- 11) Describe Malebolge's general layout. Why is the name fitting?
- 12) What links the Panderers, Simoniacs, and Grafters (besides Fraud)?

Ninth Circle

- 1) Describe the Ninth Circle's environment, and explain the contrapasso we see. What separates Caïna, Antenora, Ptolomea, and Judecca? What determines the severity of one's punishment here?
- 2) What's particularly noteworthy about Ptolomea's damned souls?

Allusions

Canto I

- 1) What does the Wood represent? Why does Dante choose the Wood (versus, say, an Ocean) as his symbol here?
- 2) What was Dante's likely Biblical inspiration for his choice of the Three Beasts?
- 3) In addition to that Biblical passage, the She-Wolf would have had special significance for Italian readers. Please explain why, and examine the differences (and the reasons for them) between the "classic" She-Wolf and Dante's beast.
- 4) Dante meets Virgil outside of the Dark Wood. What significance would he have had for the poet?
- 5) What does the Greyhound prophecy suggest, both literally and symbolically (since seemingly everything in *The Inferno* is significant in both ways)?

Canto II

- 1) Which figures does Dante compare himself to, and why?

The Gate of Hell and the Vestibule

- 1) Compare and contrast Virgil's use and descriptions of Acheron and Charon with Dante's.

First Circle

- 1) Describe the Harrowing of Hell. Raffa says that Dante emphasized the power – in both physical and psychological terms – of Christ's raid on Hell; why is this important?

Second Circle

- 1) Describe each of the following figures' stories: Dido, Cleopatra, Helen & Paris, and Tristan and Isolde.

Third Circle

- 1) What is Virgil talking about when he speaks of Judgment, and what will happen to the souls then?

Fourth Circle

- 1) How did Boethius portray Fortune in *Consolation of Philosophy*?

Sixth Circle

- 1) Who was Erichtho, and where did Dante "steal" her from? How does Erichtho relate to Virgil within the context of Dante's narrative? (There are two ways...)
- 2) How were the Furies commonly used? How did Virgil use them in *The Aeneid*?

- 3) Why do the Furies mention Theseus?
- 4) What's Medusa's "special power," and how did Perseus defeat her?
- 5) Who were Theseus and Hercules? How are the two related within the context of Dante's narrative?
- 6) Who was Epicurus? Why was he significant?
- 7) Who was Guido Cavalcanti, and what personal significance would he have had for Dante?
- 8) Frederick II was most important to Dante from an artistic standpoint. How would he have affected his artistic development (and how did Dante, in turn, affect others)?
- 9) How did Pope Anastasius II lose the True Way?

Seventh Circle

- 1) Explain the Minotaur's backstory. Why is his placement in Hell fitting?
- 2) Which sinners do we see punished in the Seventh Circle's First Round, and why does each belong here?
- 3) What does the Unknown Florentine Suicide stand for, and why?
- 4) Why is the Old Man of Crete constructed as he is? How are Hell's "rivers" (Acheron, Styx, Phlegethon, and Lethe) formed?
- 5) Who were Phaethon, Daedalus, and Icarus? Why does Dante allude to them?

Dante's Life, Style, and Themes

Into the Inferno

- 1) Where was Dante born, and what do we know about his familial history and upbringing?
- 2) Why were Dante's educational opportunities noteworthy? Who were a couple of noteworthy figures he met over the course of his education?
- 3) Why is Florence's political system changing before Dante enters the world? Which factions arose before his birth, and what characterized them? How did Dante enter the political world?
- 4) Why did the Blacks (Neri) oppose the Whites (Bianchi), and why did Dante have uncomfortable personal ties to each faction?
- 5) What "moral compromise" did Dante make?
- 6) Describe, as best you can, the events that led to Dante's exile.
- 7) Why wasn't Dante killed during the initial "purges"?
- 8) Why doesn't Dante join the Ghibellines while in exile? Why doesn't he return home in 1316 when he's offered a "deal"?
- 9) How is Dante's Hell structured? Who/what were his main influences?

Canto I

- 1) How old is Dante when he awakens in the Wood? Why is his age significant?

- 2) Why does Dante's story begin in media res (i.e., what does Dante hope to achieve by doing so)?
- 3) What do the path of the True Way and Mount Joy represent?
- 4) What's the difference between Ciardi's representation of the Three Beasts and their portrayal in other translations – specifically, the Leopard and the She-Wolf? Why would this be important? (Hint: Think about the way Dante structures Hell.)
- 5) I've emphasized that The Inferno is a spiritual journey told through physical allegory. Explain what I mean by this: what's really "going on" in this story, and why does Dante tell his story this way?

Canto II

- 1) Who are the Three Blessed Women? What do they embody, and what sort of significance would one in particular have had for Dante?

The Gate of Hell and the Vestibule

- 1) What's noteworthy about the rhyme scheme Ciardi uses in his translation of that transcription? How does it compare to Dante's?
- 2) Dante identifies one suffering soul in particular, and while he's never named, the overriding sentiment among literary critics states that the poet sees Pope Celestine V. Why would Dante feel animosity towards this figure?

First Circle

- 1) Please compare the medieval Christian idea of Limbo with Dante's version.

Second Circle

- 1) What does Raffa mean when he talks about Dante's attempt to "juggle the ennobling power of attraction toward the beauty of a whole person and the destructive force of possessive sexual desire"?
- 2) In what ways are Dante's ideas similar to Robert J. Sternberg's (from the "Happily Ever After" packet in the Gilgamesh unit)?

Third Circle

- 1) Dante takes great pains to highlight his inability to recognize Ciaccio. This failure is important for two reasons; what are they?
- 2) Describe Ciaccio's "prophecy."

Fourth Circle

- 1) What purpose does Dante give Fortune? How does her relationship with mortals compare – and contrast with – those between gods and mortals in *Gilgamesh*?

Fifth Circle

- 1) Why does Virgil react proudly when Dante expresses glee at the sight of Filippo Argenti's soul being torn apart?

Sixth Circle

- 1) Why should the Guelphs be grateful to Farinata? How did they treat him instead? Why does Dante ultimately respect Farinata? (Think about how they're similar...)
- 2) What point about family and politics do both Cavalcante dei Cavalcanti and Farinata illustrate?
- 3) Guido Cavalcanti dies a couple of months after being banished from Florence by Dante and the other priors. Why did the priors banish him, and why did he die?
- 4) How do Guido Cavalcanti and Dante view love, and why does the latter believe the former is therefore destined for the Sixth Circle when he dies?
- 5) How does Raffa attempt to fit the Vestibule, Limbo, and the Sixth Circle into Dante's Aristotlean moral structure?

Seventh Circle

- 1) Describe the influences on Dante's view of suicide. What do you think his view of suicide really is?
- 2) Describe the "prophecy" Ser Brunetto Latini offers.
- 3) How does Brunetto Latini's *The Little Treasure* hint at the ideas that would form the backbone of Dante's Divine Comedy?
- 4) What does Dante tell the souls he encounters about Florence?

Eighth Circle

- 1) Which of the views Dante expresses in Circle Eight seem outdated or even offensive to many members of today's audiences?
- 2) Explain the relationship between fraud and power. Also, why is fraud the corruption of human reason, both on the part of the liar and victim?
- 3) What do the Giants symbolize?