

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS The two poets arrive at the gate of Hell and read the inscription above it. They then enter the vestibule and notice the souls confined there. Read to find out about these souls.

Preview In Canto 2, Virgil explains that Beatrice, the woman Dante had idealized and loved from afar when she was alive, descended from Heaven in order to ask him to guide Dante on his journey. In Canto 3, Virgil takes Dante through the gate of Hell into a dark, starless vestibule. They notice the souls of the unsure, those who chose neither good nor evil in life. When the two poets arrive at the shore of the river Acheron, Dante sees an old man gathering sinners to ferry across the river into Hell.

CANTO 3



THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO THE CITY OF WOES,
THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO ETERNAL PAIN,
THROUGH ME YOU ENTER THE POPULATION OF LOSS.

JUSTICE MOVED MY HIGH MAKER, IN POWER DIVINE,
5 WISDOM SUPREME, LOVE PRIMAL. NO THINGS WERE
BEFORE ME NOT ETERNAL; ETERNAL I REMAIN.

5 primal: original; most important

ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.
These words I saw inscribed in some dark color
Over a portal. "Master," I said, "make clear

9 portal: doorway.

10 Their meaning, which I find too hard to gather."
Then he, as one who understands: "All fear
Must be left here, and cowardice die. Together,

We have arrived where I have told you: here
You will behold the wretched souls who've lost
15 The good of intellect." Then, with good cheer

14-15 souls . . . intellect: those who have lost sight of God.

In his expression to encourage me, he placed
His hand on mine: so, trusting to my guide,
I followed him among things undisclosed.



Inscription over the Gate
(1824–1827), William Blake.
Illustration to *Hell*, Canto 3, of
Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.
Watercolor, 52.7 cm × 37.4 cm.
Tate Gallery, London/Art
Resource, New York.

The sighs, groans and laments at first were so loud,
Resounding through starless air, I began to weep:
Strange languages, horrible screams, words imbued

With rage or despair, cries as of troubled sleep
Or of a tortured shrillness—they rose in a coil
Of tumult, along with noises like the slap

Of beating hands, all fused in a ceaseless flail
That churns and frenzies that dark and timeless air
Like sand in a whirlwind. And I, my head in a swirl

Of error, cried: “Master, what is this I hear?
What people are these, whom pain has overcome?”
He: “This is the sorrowful state of souls unsure,

Whose lives earned neither honor nor bad fame.
And they are mingled with angels of that base sort
Who, neither rebellious to God nor faithful to Him,

30–31 souls unsure, . . . bad fame:
those souls who in life acted nei-
ther for good nor evil.

WORDS TO KNOW

imbued (im-byōōd') *adj.* filled or inspired imbue *v.*

Chose neither side, but kept themselves apart—
35 Now Heaven expels them, not to mar its splendor,
And Hell rejects them, lest the wicked of heart

Take glory over them." And then I: "Master,
What agony is it, that makes them keen their grief
With so much force?" He: "I will make brief answer:

38 keen: wail.

40 They have no hope of death, but a blind life
So abject, they envy any other fate.
To all memory of them, the world is deaf.

Mercy and justice disdain them. Let us not
Speak of them: look and pass on." I looked again:
45 A whirling banner sped at such a rate

It seemed it might never stop; behind it a train
Of souls, so long that I would not have thought
Death had undone so many. When more than one

I recognized had passed, I beheld the shade
50 Of him who made the Great Refusal, impelled
By cowardice: so at once I understood

49-51 the shade . . . by cowardice: probably a reference to Pope Celestine V, who gave up the papacy after only five months because of political pressures on him.

Beyond all doubt that this was the dreary guild
Repellent both to God and His enemies—
Hapless ones never alive, their bare skin galled

52-53 the dreary guild . . . enemies the unhappy group offensive to both God and demons.

55 By wasps and flies, blood trickling down the face,
Mingling with tears for harvest underfoot
By writhing maggots. Then, when I turned my eyes

54 galled: broken; made sore.

Farther along our course, I could make out
People upon the shore of some great river.
60 "Master," I said, "it seems by this dim light

57 maggots: the larvae of flies, often found in decaying matter.

That all of these are eager to cross over—
Can you tell me by what law, and who they are?"
He answered, "Those are things you will discover

WORDS TO KNOW

abject (ăb'jĕkt') *adj.* very low or miserable in condition
disdain (dī's-dān') *v.* to look down on or treat with contempt
hapless (hăp'ly's) *adj.* unfortunate

When we have paused at Acheron's dismal shore."
 I walked on with my head down after that,
 Fearful I had displeased him, and spoke no more.

PAUSE & REFLECT How are the souls of the unsure punished in the afterlife?

FOCUS Dante notices an old man in a boat. Read to find out who he is and what he does.

Then, at the river—an old man in a boat:
 White-haired, as he drew closer shouting at us,
 "Woe to you, wicked souls! Give up the thought

Of Heaven! I come to ferry you across
 Into eternal dark on the opposite side,
 Into fire and ice! And you there—leave this place,

You living soul, stand clear of these who are dead!"
 And then, when he saw that I did not obey:
 "By other ports, in a lighter boat," he said,

"You will be brought to shore by another way."
 My master spoke then, "Charon, do not rage:
 Thus is it willed where everything may be

Simply if it is willed. Therefore, oblige,
 And ask no more." That silenced the grizzled jaws
 Of the gray ferryman of the livid marsh,

Who had red wheels of flame about his eyes.
 But at his words the forlorn and naked souls
 Were changing color, cursing the human race,

God and their parents. Teeth chattering in their skulls,
 They called curses on the seed, the place, the hour
 Of their own begetting and their birth. With wails

And tears they gathered on the evil shore
 That waits for all who don't fear God. There demon
 Charon beckons them, with his eyes of fire;

64 Acheron's (ăk'ə-rŏnz') dismal shore; Acheron is the first river Dante comes upon in Hell. Its waters flow downward into the frozen river at the lowest level of Hell.

67-68 an old man: Charon (kâr'on), who, in classical mythology, ferries souls of the dead into the underworld.

83-85 the forlorn and naked souls . . . their parents: The souls of the damned are without divine grace and are not permitted to repent; they can only curse.



Crowded in a herd, they obey if he should summon,
And he strikes at any laggards with his oar.
As leaves in quick succession sail down in autumn

92 laggards: individuals who lag behind.

95 Until the bough beholds its entire store
Fallen to the earth, so Adam's evil seed
Swoop from the bank when each is called, as sure

95 seed: descendants.

As a trained falcon, to cross to the other side
Of the dark water; and before one throng can land
On the far shore, on this side new souls crowd.

100 "My son," said the gentle master, "here are joined
The souls of all who die in the wrath of God,
From every country, all of them eager to find

105 Their way across the water—for the goad
Of Divine Justice spurs them so, their fear
Is transmuted to desire. Souls who are good

103 goad: something that prods.

104–105 their fear . . . desire: In life the sinners hardened their hearts against grace. They are now required by Divine Justice to wish for Hell.

110 Never pass this way; therefore, if you hear
Charon complaining at your presence, consider
What that means." Then, the earth of that grim shore

115 Began to shake: so violently, I shudder
And sweat recalling it now. A wind burst up
From the tear-soaked ground to erupt red light and batter

My senses—and so I fell, as though seized by sleep.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. What are your impressions of Charon, the demon boatman?
2. Why does Charon complain about Dante's presence at the river?
3. In lines 93–96, the souls at the river are compared to leaves falling from a tree. Why is this simile effective?