



FROM
THE
INFERNO
DANTE ALIGHIERI

Build Background

The *Inferno* is the first of the three sections of *The Divine Comedy*. Here, Dante describes the first stage of his journey through the afterlife. He and his guide, the Roman poet Virgil, travel through the different circles, or levels, of Hell.

Dante envisions Hell as a pit within the earth where sinners are punished in the afterlife for their evil deeds. This pit is shaped like a cone that funnels downward. It has nine levels: the lower the level, the worse the sinner—and the more terrible the punishment.



Connect to Your Life

With a classmate, list several acts that you consider wrong—for example, forgery, theft, and murder. Debate the seriousness of the actions and rank them from least to most serious. What did you rank as the greatest wrong?

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS: ALLEGORY

The Divine Comedy can be read as an **allegory**, a work with two layers of meaning. In an allegory, most of the characters, places, objects, and events stand for abstract ideas or qualities. For example, in the *Inferno*, a physical place—such as the “dark woods”—stands for Dante’s spiritual condition.

ACTIVE READING: CLARIFYING MEANING

To explore meaning in this allegory, use these tips:

- Refer to the Guide for Reading, the Preview paragraphs, and the sidenotes for help in understanding difficult words and passages.
- Reread difficult passages slowly and carefully. Try to **paraphrase** them—that is, restate them in your own words.
- Ask yourself what the characters, places, objects, and events might represent.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read, take notes about the characters and events. Write down the Pause & Reflect questions you encounter and provide an answer for each.

WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

abject	discourse	hapless
avail	disdain	imbued
compulsion	fortitude	protrude
discern		

from the Inferno

Dante Alighieri

Translated by Robert Pinsky

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS Dante finds himself trapped in a dark forest. As you read, try to decide what the path, the woods, and the three beasts might represent.

Preview Halfway through life, Dante wanders off the right path and into dark, frightening woods. As he tries to climb a hill, he finds his way blocked by three beasts—a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. He later meets the spirit of the poet Virgil, who tells him he must take another path. Virgil offers to guide Dante on a journey through Hell and Purgatory.

CANTO 1

Midway on our life's journey, I found myself
 In dark woods, the right road lost. To tell
 About those woods is hard—so tangled and rough
 And savage that thinking of it now, I feel
 The old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.
 And yet, to treat the good I found there as well
 I'll tell what I saw, though how I came to enter
 I cannot well say, being so full of sleep
 Whatever moment it was I began to blunder
 Off the true path. But when I came to stop
 Below a hill that marked one end of the valley
 That had pierced my heart with terror, I looked up



The Granger Collection, New York.

HUMANITIES CONNECTION This illumination, from a 15th-century Italian manuscript, shows Virgil rescuing Dante from the three beasts. Leaving the dark woods, the two poets embark on their journey.

15 Toward the crest and saw its shoulders already
Mantled in rays of that bright planet that shows
The road to everyone, whatever our journey.

Then I could feel the terror begin to ease
That churned in my heart's lake all through the night.
As one still panting, ashore from dangerous seas,

20 Looks back at the deep he has escaped, my thought
Returned, still fleeing, to regard that grim defile
That never left any alive who stayed in it.

After I had rested my weary body awhile
I started again across the wilderness,
My left foot always lower on the hill,

25 And suddenly—a leopard, near the place
The way grew steep: lithe, spotted, quick of foot.
Blocking the path, she stayed before my face

13 **crest:** the top of the hill.

14 **that bright planet:** the sun, which in Dante's time was believed to be a planet that moved around the earth.

17 **my heart's lake:** This detail reflects the medieval belief that the heart was a reservoir for blood.

20 **defile:** a steep, narrow valley.

25–38 **a leopard . . . a lion . . . a grim she-wolf:** These three animals are generally believed to stand for lust, pride, and greed, the three general categories of sin treated in the poem.

30 And more than once she made me turn about
To go back down. It was early morning still,
The fair sun rising with the stars attending it

As when Divine Love set those beautiful
Lights into motion at creation's dawn,
And the time of day and season combined to fill

35 My heart with hope of that beast with festive skin—
But not so much that the next sight wasn't fearful:
A lion came at me, his head high as he ran,

Roaring with hunger so the air appeared to tremble.
Then, a grim she-wolf—whose leanness seemed to compress
All the world's cravings, that had made miserable

40 Such multitudes; she put such heaviness
Into my spirit, I lost hope of the crest.
Like someone eager to win, who tested by loss

45 Surrenders to gloom and weeps, so did that beast
Make me feel, as harrying toward me at a lope
She forced me back toward where the sun is lost.

PAUSE & REFLECT How does Dante react to the she-wolf?

FOCUS Driven back into the dark woods, Dante meets the spirit of Virgil. Read to find out why Virgil is a good guide for the lost poet.

While I was ruining myself back down to the deep,
Someone appeared—one who seemed nearly to fade
As though from long silence. I cried to his human shape

50 In that great wasteland: "Living man or shade,
Have pity and help me, whichever you may be!"
"No living man, though once I was," he replied.

"My parents both were Mantuans from Lombardy,
And I was born *sub Julio*, the latter end.
I lived in good Augustus's Rome, in the day

34 **that beast with festive skin:** the leopard, whose coat is gaily colored.

38–39 **whose leanness . . . cravings:** whose thinness seemed to squeeze together all the desires of the world.

44 **harrying:** moving threateningly.

46 **ruining:** falling into ruin or disaster.

49 **shade:** a spirit of a dead person.

52 **Mantuans from Lombardy:** Lombardy, a region in northern Italy, is where the city of Mantua is located.

53 **sub Julio:** during the reign of Julius Caesar.

54 **Augustus's Rome:** Rome under its first emperor, Augustus, grand-nephew of Julius Caesar.

55 Of the false gods who lied. A poet, I hymned
Anchises' noble son, who came from Troy
When superb Ilium in its pride was burned.

But you—why go back down to such misery?
Why not ascend the delightful mountain, source
60 And principle that causes every joy?”

“Then are you Virgil? Are you the font that pours
So overwhelming a river of human speech?”
I answered, shamefaced. “The glory and light are yours,

That poets follow—may the love that made me search
65 Your book in patient study avail me, Master!
You are my guide and author, whose verses teach

The graceful style whose model has done me honor.
See this beast driving me backward—help me resist,
For she makes all my veins and pulses shudder.”

70 “A different path from this one would be best
For you to find your way from this feral place,”
He answered, seeing how I wept. “This beast,

The cause of your complaint, lets no one pass
Her way—but harries all to death. Her nature
75 Is so malign and vicious she cannot appease

Her voracity, for feeding makes her hungrier.
Many are the beasts she mates: there will be more,
Until the Hound comes who will give this creature

A painful death. Not nourished by earthly fare,
80 He will be fed by wisdom, goodness and love.
Born between Feltro and Feltro, he shall restore

Low Italy, as Nisus fought to achieve.
And Turnus, Euryalus, Camilla the maiden—
All dead from wounds in war. He will remove

56 Anchises' (än-kī'sēz') noble son: Aeneas (ĭ-nē'ēs), who fled from Troy (Ilium) when it was burned and eventually founded Rome. His story is told in Virgil's *Aeneid* (see pages 356–381).

71 feral: wild; savage.

75–76 appease her voracity: satisfy her hunger.

78–81 the Hound . . . Feltro and Feltro: The Hound may be Cangrande della Scala, who supported Dante in exile and who was born in Verona, between the cities of Feltre and Montefeltro.

82–83 Nisus . . . Turnus, Euryalus (yūr-rī'ē-lēs), Camilla the maiden: These are characters in Virgil's *Aeneid* who die in the war between the Trojans and the Latins.

85 This lean wolf, hunting her through every region
Till he has thrust her back to Hell's abyss
Where Envy first dispatched her on her mission.

Therefore I judge it best that you should choose
To follow me, and I will be your guide
90 Away from here and through an eternal place:

To hear the cries of despair, and to behold
Ancient tormented spirits as they lament
In chorus the second death they must abide.

Then you shall see those souls who are content
95 To dwell in fire because they hope some day
To join the blessed: toward whom, if your ascent

Continues, your guide will be one worthier than I—
When I must leave you, you will be with her.
For the Emperor who governs from on high

100 Wills I not enter His city, where none may appear
Who lived like me in rebellion to His law.
His empire is everything and everywhere,

But that is His kingdom, His city, His seat of awe.
Happy is the soul He chooses for that place!”
105 I: “Poet, please—by the God you did not know—

Help me escape this evil that I face,
And worse. Lead me to witness what you have said,
Saint Peter's gate, and the multitude of woes—”

Then he set out, and I followed where he led.

94–96 souls who are content . . . to join the blessed: souls in Purgatory, who know they will someday go to Heaven.

97 one worthier than I: Beatrice.

100–101 where none may appear . . . His law: Virgil, a pagan Roman, did not worship God and thus cannot enter Heaven.

Thinking Through the Literature

- 1. How does Dante feel about himself at the beginning of the story?
- 2. What is Dante's attitude toward Virgil?
- 3. What do you **predict** might happen to Dante on his journey through Hell?