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Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Inferno

by Dante Alighieri

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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ISBN: 978-1-58049-298-0

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Item No: 300537

The Inferno

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the symbolism of the punishments in Hell.
2. explain the structure of Hell (i.e., division of Upper and Lower Hell and subdivision of Lower Hell, location of Limbo, the four rivers, and city of Dis).
3. explain the classical symbolism of the four rivers of Hell, and show how Dante makes them fit his own symbolism.
4. explain the significance of the lion, leopard, and she-wolf.
5. discuss Dante's symbolic astrology, and trace it through the poem.
6. understand the original meter and importance of the date of the poem.
7. summarize the relation of Human Reason to Divine Grace in the poem.
8. analyze the numerical symbolism of *The Inferno*.
9. explain the significance of the date on which the journey begins and ends.
10. explain the use and significance of imagery involving the following: dark woods, mountains, rivers, stars, fire, ice.
11. explain the important literary figures in Hell and the works from which Dante drew them.
12. give a brief summary of the civil unrest in Dante's Florence, and explain his own involvement.
13. explain the presence of the clergy in Hell and the condition of the Catholic Church in Dante's time.
14. explain the function of the political prophecies uttered by characters in the poem.
15. outline the difference between "Fate" and "Fortune," and cite mention of each in the poem.
16. explain who Virgil was, when he lived, what he wrote, and why he was important to Dante.
17. describe Dante's use of poetic conventions, including epic similes, invocation of the Muses, and a metaphor drawn from the love poetry of his own day.

The Inferno

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. *The Divine Comedy* is divided into three sections: *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. In *The Inferno*, Dante learns to recognize sin; in *Purgatory*, he renounces it. What is the importance of recognition to repentance and forgiveness?
2. At first, Dante follows Virgil with great eagerness and high hopes. By Canto II, however, Dante's spirits have begun to flag. Why does he think he cannot make the journey? How is he persuaded to go on?
3. An epic poem is typically a lengthy chronicle of a legendary hero's adventure. The poet often uses epic similes and formally appeals to the Muses for help writing the poem. Would you say *The Inferno* fits the definition of an "epic" poem? List some reasons why it should or should not be called "epic."
4. What is the significance of the inscription above Hell's gate? How does it help to explain why the inhabitants of Hell are static, rather than dynamic, characters?
5. Why are the "Opportunists" punished outside of Hell? What was the nature of their sin? How is their self-interest different from the self-interest shown by the sinners of Lower Hell?
6. What is the symbolism of the citadel Dante and Virgil see in Limbo? Why are the people in Limbo unable to get to Paradise?
7. As the poets pass through the Second Circle, home of the "carnal" sinners, Dante catches sight of Dido, who killed herself for love. A separate Circle is set aside for suicides, so why is Dido in this specific Circle? What, might we infer, did Dante think of her sin?
8. Why does Dante faint at the end of Canto V? How is his swoon like the cord he uses in Canto XVI?
9. In Canto VI, Ciaccio, the glutton, prophesies to Dante about Guelph infighting. Of course, as Dante was writing, everything that Ciaccio "predicts" had already happened. Why does Dante include such "prophecies"? How are they related to his reason for writing *The Inferno*? Consider the prophecies of Farinata (Canto X) and Brunetto (Canto XV) as you answer.
10. Ciaccio is eager to be remembered on Earth and asks Dante to speak his name among the living. What is the importance of his desire to be known? Does everyone in Hell want to be remembered?

1. Why is the first stanza of *The Inferno* significant? How does it prepare us for the rest of the poem?

2. How does Dante the poet portray Dante the narrator? Is this character emotional or stoic? Can we sympathize with him?

3. Why does the poet portray the narrator this way?

4. What is the significance of the date and time of the beginning of Dante's journey? Make a note of the dates and times mentioned throughout *The Inferno* as you read them, and explain their significance.

5. What do the three beasts symbolize?

Canto IV

Vocabulary

affliction – something that causes pain, disease, or suffering
antiquity – ancient times
battlements – the defensive stonework on the top of a castle or fort
citadel – a fortress
creed – a statement of belief
desolate – grim, bleak; depressing
dolorous – full of pain and sorrow
luminous – filled with light
nebulous – hazy, cloudy; vague
pallor – paleness of the skin
proclaimed – announced, declared

1. Who dwells in the First Circle of Hell? What is their punishment? What inference can you make here?

2. Find a literary term that is used between lines 30 – 60.

3. Who, according to Virgil, did eventually leave Limbo for Paradise?

5. Why is Farinata classified as a heretic?

6. Analyze the “three-part” conversation between Dante, Farinata, and Cavalcanti. Why is it a classic example of the marriage of symbolism and drama?

7. Why, according to Dante, is Guido Cavalcanti not present? How does his answer fit into the larger scheme of *The Inferno*?

8. Relate the following to one another: the faint of the elder Cavalcanti, the explanation of the prophetic ability of the dead by Farinata, and Dante’s own development.

9. What sense detail in the next Circle does Dante hint at as he ends this Canto?

Canto XVII

Vocabulary

argent – silver in color
azure – light blue in color
benign – kind; gentle
cavalier – a gallant gentleman
excursion – a brief trip
guile – deceit, trickery
precipice – a steep cliff
prototype – an original model
sovereign – having supreme rank; royal
undaunted – courageous

1. What is the symbolism of Geryon?

2. Why does Dante include the brief interlude in which he goes to observe the Usurers?

3. What is the allegorical significance of Virgil's encouragement?
