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Dante's inferno canto 1-5 summary

Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself In dark woods, the right road lost. See Important Quotations Explained Halfway through his life, the poet Dante finds himself wandering alone in a dark forest, having lost his way on the “true path” (l.10). He says that he does not remember how he lost his way, but he has wandered into a fearful place, a dark and tangled valley. Above, he sees a great hill that seems to offer protection from the shadowed glen. The sun shines down from this hilltop, and Dante attempts to climb toward the light. As he climbs, however, he encounters three angry beasts in succession—a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf—which force him to turn back. Returning in despair to the dark valley, Dante sees a human form in the woods, which soon reveals itself to be the spirit, or shade, of the great Roman poet Virgil. Thrilled to meet the poet that he most admires, Dante tells Virgil about the beasts that blocked his path. Virgil replies that the she-wolf kills all who approach her but that, someday, a magnificent hound will come to chase the she-wolf back to Hell, where she originated. He adds that the she-wolf’s presence necessitates the use of a different path to ascend the hill; he offers to serve as Dante’s guide. He warns Dante, however, that before they can climb the hill they must first pass through the place of eternal punishment (Hell) and then a place of lesser punishment (Purgatory); only then can they reach God’s city (Heaven). Encouraged by Virgil’s assurances, Dante sets forth with his guide. Summary: Canto II Dante invokes the Muses, the ancient goddesses of art and poetry, and asks them to help him tell of his experiences. Dante relates that as he and Virgil approach the mouth of Hell, his mind turns to the journey ahead and again he feels the grip of dread. He can recall only two men who have ever ventured into the afterlife and returned: the Apostle Paul, who visited the Third Circle of Heaven, and Aeneas, who travels through Hell in Virgil’s Aeneid. Dante considers himself less worthy than these two and fears that he may not survive his passage through Hell. Virgil rebukes Dante for his cowardice and then reassures him with the story of how he knew to find Dante and act as his guide. According to Virgil, a woman in Heaven took pity upon Dante when he was lost and came down to Hell (where Virgil lives) to ask Virgil to help him. This woman was Beatrice, Dante’s departed love, who now has an honored place among the blessed. She had learned of Dante’s plight from St. Lucia, also in Heaven, who in turn heard about the poor poet from an unnamed lady, most likely the Virgin Mary. Thus, a trio of holy women watches over Dante from above. Virgil says that Beatrice wept as she told him of Dante’s misery and that he found her entreaty deeply moving. Dante feels comforted to hear that his beloved Beatrice has gone to Heaven and cares so much for him. He praises both her and Virgil for their aid and then continues to follow Virgil toward Hell. Analysis: Cantos I–II From a structural point of view, the first two cantos of Inferno function as an introduction, presenting the main dramatic situation and maneuvering Dante and Virgil to the entrance of Hell, the journey through which will constitute the main plot of the poem. In a larger sense, however, the opening cantos help to establish the relationship between Inferno and larger literary, political, and religious tradition, indicating their points of convergence and deviation. Inferno takes the form of an allegory, a story whose literal plot deals entirely in symbols, imbuing the story with a second level of meaning implied by, but broader than, the events of the narrative. On a literal level, The Divine Comedy portrays Dante’s adventures in the fantastic realms of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but these adventures allegorically represent a broader subject: the trials of the human soul to achieve morality and find unity with God. Read more about the poem as a medieval allegory. From the opening lines, Dante makes clear the allegorical intention of his poem: “Midway on our life’s journey, I found myself / In dark woods, the right road lost” (l.1–2). By writing “our life’s journey” (emphasis added) and with his generic phrase “the right road,” Dante links his own personal experience to that of all humanity. The dark woods symbolize sinful life on Earth, and the “right road” refers to the virtuous life that leads to God. Read an in-depth analysis of the opening lines of the poem. In this way, Dante links his poem to the larger tradition of medieval Christian allegory, most famously represented in English by Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. A great deal of medieval Christian allegory portrayed a character type known as Everyman, a Christian protagonist (even named “Christian” in Bunyan’s work) representing all of humanity; the Everyman character undergoes trials and tribulations in his search to find the soul’s true path in life. By making himself the hero of his story, Dante casts himself in the role of Everyman; more broadly, Dante literally wishes each individual to put him- or herself in the position described at the beginning of the poem, since, according to Christian doctrine, all people know some form of sin and thus wander lost in a dark wood. Similarly, the path to the blessed afterlife awaits anyone who seeks to find it. Read an in-depth analysis of Dante as Everyman. The opening tercet (a three-line stanza) of Inferno also situates the poem in time. The Bible’s Psalms describe a human lifespan as being “threescore and ten years,” or seventy years. Because of the many close links between The Divine Comedy and the Bible, most critics agree that Dante would have considered man’s lifespan to be seventy years; thus, “midway on our life’s journey” would make Dante thirty-five, locating the events in the year 1300. These cantos contain many passages, however, whose analysis has produced more disagreement than accord. For example, one can reasonably assume that the three beasts that menace Dante as he tries to climb the sunlit hill represent dark forces that threaten mankind, but it is difficult to define them more concretely. Early commentators on the poem often considered them to represent the sins of lust, pride, and avarice. The three beasts also have a biblical analogue in Jeremiah 5:6: “Wherefore a lion out of the forest shall slay them, and a leopard shall watch over their cities.” Much of the allegory in Inferno takes a political tone, referring to the situation in Italy (especially Florence) during Dante’s lifetime, and to the conflict between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. It thus seems probable that the three beasts also carry political connotations, a theory reinforced by Virgil’s prophecy about the hound that will drive the she-wolf away, which some critics have read as a symbol for a great leader who would one day unite Italy. Read more about political arguments as a motif. Virgil tells Dante that he lived in Rome during the time of Augustus, in the age of “the false gods who lied.” The fact that Virgil recognizes the old Roman gods as “false” and “lying” (in other words, non-Christian) instances Dante’s use of a technique called intertemporality—the mingling of elements from different time periods. Having entered into eternity, Virgil—like many of Dante’s other characters—can now see into times other than those in which he lived. He is thus able to understand what Dante considers truthful theology. Read more about who Virgil is. The use of intertemporality permeates much of the artistic and literary tradition of medieval times; biblical characters, for example, were almost always represented in art as wearing medieval clothing, and the “heathenism” of medieval Muslims was emphasized by portraying them as worshipping the ancient Greek god Apollo. Yet, while these forms of intertemporality often seem merely anachronistic, the technique is more aesthetically and logically satisfying within the context of Dante’s poem: his characters can see beyond their time on Earth because in death they exist outside of time. While Dante portrays Virgil as having learned truths from future generations, he presents himself as having gained knowledge from Virgil, commenting that the ancient poet taught him “the graceful style” that has brought him fame (l.67). The “graceful style” denotes the tragic style of the ancients, the style of epic poems—the Odyssey, the Iliad, the Aeneid.And Dante was indeed capable of commanding this high style; at the beginning of Canto II, his invocation of the Muses—the traditional way to begin a classical epic—echoes Virgil’s call for the Muses’ inspiration in the opening of the Aeneid. Read an in-depth analysis of Virgil. However, one may question the statement that it is this particular style that brought Dante fame: the poet elsewhere employs many other styles with equal skill. Dante clearly respects tradition but is not beholden to it, as is made clear by the way that he follows but also breaks from traditional uses of allegory, the trope of the Everyman, and intertemporality. As the remainder of the poem will make clear, his goal is not simply to mimic Virgil. Indeed, Dante’s awareness of the differences between himself and Virgil may have contributed to his decision to name his work The Comedy; rather than employing exclusively high rhetoric, it frequently employs the simple, vernacular idiom of its time, and rather than using Latin, the traditional language of a grand epic, it is written in Italian, the language of the people, and a language that Dante hoped every man could understand. Read more about the historical context around Dante’s work The Divine Comedy.

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