

# Module 15

## Readings:

Inferno

Dante

DANTE

# INFERNO

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*Translated, Edited, and with an  
Introduction by Anthony Esolen*

*Illustrations by Gustave Doré*



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## CANTO THREE

*Virgil and Dante enter the gates of Hell. There they meet the small-souled, those unnamed spirits whose cowardice relegates them to the vestibule of the lower world. Passing onward, they come to the river Acheron, whose ferryman, Charon, ushers the gathered souls to their eternal misery.*

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE,  
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL PAIN,  
I AM THE WAY TO GO AMONG THE LOST.

JUSTICE CAUSED MY HIGH ARCHITECT TO MOVE: 4  
DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE CREATED ME,  
THE HIGHEST WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.

BEFORE ME THERE WERE NO CREATED THINGS 7  
BUT THOSE THAT LAST FOREVER—AS DO I.  
ABANDON ALL HOPE YOU WHO ENTER HERE.

I saw these words of dark and harsh intent 10  
engraved upon the archway of a gate.

“Teacher,” I said, “their sense is hard for me.”

And he to me, as one who read my thoughts: 13

“Here you must leave distrust and doubt behind,  
here you must put all cowardice to death.

We have come to the place I spoke about, 16

where you would see the souls who dwell in pain,  
for they have lost the good of intellect.”

And after he had laid his hand on mine 19

with cheerful countenance, strengthening my resolve,  
he led me to the secret things below.

There sighs and moans and utter wailing swept 22  
    resounding through the dark and starless air.  
    I heard them for the first time, and I wept.  
Shuddering din of strange and various tongues, 25  
    sorrowful words and accents pitched with rage,  
    shrill and harsh voices, blows of hands with these  
Raised up a tumult ever swirling round 28  
    in that dark air untinted by a dawn,  
    as sand-grains whipping when the whirlwind blows.  
Said I—a blind of horror held my brain— 31  
    “My Teacher, what are all these cries I hear?  
    Who are these people conquered by their pain?”  
And he to me: “This state of misery 34  
    is clutched by those sad souls whose works in life  
    merited neither praise nor infamy.  
Here they’re thrown in among that petty choir 37  
    of angels who were for themselves alone,  
    not rebels, and not faithful to the Lord.  
Heaven drives them out—to keep its beauty pure, 40  
    nor will the deep abyss receive their souls,  
    lest they bring glory to the wicked there.”  
And I: “Teacher, what weighs upon their hearts? 43  
    What grief is it that makes them wail so loud?”  
    And he responded, “A few words will do.  
These souls, immortal, have no hope for death, 46  
    and their blind lives crept groveling so low  
    they leer with envy at every other lot.  
The world allows no rumor of them now. 49  
    Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.  
    Let’s say no more about them. Look, and pass.”  
And I, beholding, saw a banner fly, 52  
    whirling about and racing with such speed  
    it seemed that it would scorn to stand, or pause,  
And all behind that flag in a long file 55  
    so numerous a host of people ran,  
    I had not thought death had unmade so many.

When I had recognized a few of these, 58  
     I saw and knew at once the shade of him,  
     the craven one,<sup>o</sup> who made the great denial.  
 Immediately I understood the truth: 61  
     this was the low sect of those paltry souls  
     hateful to God and to his enemies.  
 These worthless wretches who had never lived 64  
     were pricked to motion now perpetually  
     by flies and wasps that stung their naked limbs  
 And ran the blood in furrows down their faces, 67  
     which, mingled with their tears, fell to their feet,  
     where loathsome maggots gathered up the rot.  
 When I had turned my gaze ahead, I saw 70  
     a band of people gathered at the banks  
     of a broad river. "Teacher, if you please,  
 Let me know of those people, and what law 73  
     makes them appear so eager to cross over,  
     from what I make out through the feeble light."  
 And he responded, "These things will be made 76  
     plain to you when we fix our steps upon  
     the melancholy shores of Acheron."<sup>o</sup>  
 Then with eyes fallen low and full of shame, 79  
     fearing that I had burdened him with talk,  
     I held my words until we reached the stream.  
 And look here—coming at us in a boat, 82  
     an old man, hair and lank skin white with age,  
     hollering, "Woe to you, you crooked souls!  
 Give up all hope to look upon the sky! 85  
     I come to lead you to the other shore,  
     into eternal darkness—fire and ice!  
 And as for you there, you the living soul, 88  
     get away from these others who are dead."  
     But when he saw that I would not depart

<sup>o</sup> *the craven one*: Some critics say it is Pontius Pilate; most agree that it is Pope Celestine V, who abdicated the papacy in 1294. See notes.

<sup>o</sup> *Acheron*: one of the five rivers of the classical underworld. Three others, Styx, Phlegethon, and Cocytus, Dante will encounter below. All are really stages of the same river (see 14.116–38). The other one, Lethe, he will cross at the top of the Mountain of Purgatory (*Purg.* 28.130).

He said, "Another way, another port  
 will bring your passage to the shore—not here.  
 A lighter boat<sup>o</sup> must carry you across."  
 "Quit grumbling, Charon," said my guide. "Be still! 94  
 No questions—only know that this is willed  
 where power is power to do whatever it will."  
 Then all at once the goatish jowls fell quiet, 97  
 those of the rower of that livid swamp,  
 whose furious eyes yet flashed with wheels of fire.  
 But when they heard the old man's cruel words 100  
 those naked and exhausted souls turned white,  
 gnashing their teeth with fury for their fate—  
 Hurl'd blasphemy at God and at their parents, 103  
 at the whole human race, the place, the time,  
 and the seed of their begetting and their birth.  
 Then all these people, wailing bitterly, 106  
 gathered upon the cursed riverbank  
 that awaits each man who does not fear the Lord.  
 Charon the demon, eyes of fiery coal, 109  
 signals them all to get into the boat—  
 smacks with his oar the soul that lags behind.  
 As in the fall when leaves are lifted off, 112  
 one drops—another—till the naked branch  
 sees all its garment lying on the earth,  
 So the bad seed of Adam one by one 115  
 toss themselves from the shore at Charon's sign,  
 as hawks returning to the master's call.  
 They cross the murky waters, and before 118  
 they disembark upon the farther side,  
 another throng has gathered at the shore.  
 My gracious Teacher spoke to me: "My son, 121  
 all souls that die beneath the wrath of God  
 from every nation here collect in one,  
 And they are prompt to cross the river, for 124  
 Justice Divine so goads and spurs them on,  
 that what they fear turns into their desire.

<sup>o</sup> a *lighter boat*: the ferry from the Tiber's shores to the Mountain of Purgatory (*Purg.* 2.100–5).

No good soul ever passes by these ways,  
and so, if Charon rails about you, well—  
you know how to interpret what he says.”  
He finished, and the gloomy plains of Hell  
shook with such might that though the terror’s past  
it bathes me in a sweat to think of it.  
That tear-drenched land heaved forth a sudden blast,  
flashing a lightning bolt as red as fire  
that vanquished all my senses, and I fell  
As a man falls whom sleep has overcome.

127  
130  
133  
136

## CANTO FOUR

*Dante and Virgil descend into the abyss. They enter the first of the concentric rings of Hell, that of Limbo, the Rim, where dwell, neither in joy nor in suffering, all unbaptized infants and those men and women who lived virtuously but who lacked the true faith. There they meet Homer and the great poets of old, and Aristotle and the great philosophers.*

Thunder! a great boom broke into the deep  
sleep in my head and made me shake myself  
as one who is awakened by main force—  
Then I stood up and turned my rested eyes 4  
about me, peering steadily, to see  
what kind of place it was where I awoke.  
Indeed I found myself upon the brink 7  
of the valley of the sorrowful abyss  
thundering with the roar of endless woe.  
So dark it was and deep and bleared with mist, 10  
that though I fixed my gaze upon the bottom  
I still could not discern a single thing.  
“Into the blind world let us now descend,” 13  
began the poet, his face as pale as death.  
“I will go first, and you will follow me.”  
And I—for I had seen his color turn— 16  
replied, “How should I go, when you’re afraid,  
you who have been my courage when I doubt?”  
“The anguish of the souls who dwell down here,” 19  
he answered me, “has painted in my face  
the pity you have taken to be fear.  
We must be moving on. The road is long.” 22  
So he set forth, and so he made me enter  
into the first belt circling the abyss.

As far as I could tell from listening, here 25  
     there were no wails, but only sighs, that made  
     a trembling in the everlasting air.  
 They rose from sorrow, without punishment, 28  
     the sorrow of vast throngs of people there,  
     of men and women and of infants too.  
 “You don’t ask,” my good Teacher said to me, 31  
     “who are these souls you look upon? Before  
     you go on in your journey, you must know  
 They did not sin. If they had merits, these 34  
     were not enough—baptism they did not have,  
     the one gate to the faith which *you* believe.  
 And if they lived before the Christian faith, 37  
     they did not give God homage as they ought,  
     and of these people I myself am one.  
 For such a falling short, and for no crime, 40  
     we all are lost, and suffer only this:  
     hopeless, we live forever in desire.”  
 When I heard this, great sorrow seized my heart, 43  
     for I saw men of great distinction there  
     hovering in Limbo at the edge of Hell.  
 “Tell me, my Teacher, tell me, my good lord,” 46  
     I started—for I wanted to confirm  
     the faith that conquers every path that strays,  
 “Has anyone ever left here by his own 49  
     or by another’s merits, to be blessed?”  
     He heard the meaning mantled by my words  
 And said, “I had just entered in this state 52  
     when I saw coming One<sup>o</sup> of power and might,  
     crowned with the glorious sign of victory.  
 From us he took the shade of our first father,<sup>o</sup> 55  
     the shades of his son Abel and of Noah,  
     of Moses who, obedient, gave the Law,

<sup>o</sup> *One of power and might*: Christ, in the harrowing of Hell between his death and resurrection. The *sign of victory* is the haloed cross.

<sup>o</sup> *our first father*: Adam.

Of patriarch Abraham, David the king, 58  
     of Israel with his father and his sons  
     and Rachel,<sup>o</sup> whom so long he labored for,  
 And many others, and he made them blessed. 61  
     And I want you to know that, before these,  
     salvation came for not one human soul.”  
 We did not leave off walking while he spoke 64  
     but went on through the forest all the way—  
     I mean the forest thicketed with souls.  
 We hadn't ventured far from where I'd slept 67  
     when there before us blazed a ring of light  
     quelling the darkness that surrounded it.  
 We were still quite a little length away 70  
     but close enough for me to see in part  
     that people to be honored held that place.  
 “O you who honor knowledge and all art, 73  
     who are these here so favored that they dwell  
     distinguished from the manner of the rest?”  
 And he: “The honored name that still resounds 76  
     their glory in your life above has won  
     the grace from Heaven that now exalts them here.”  
 And suddenly I heard a voice call out: 79  
     “Honor the highest prince of poetry!  
     His shade which had departed has returned.”  
 And when the voice had ceased, and all was still, 82  
     I saw four mighty shades approaching us  
     with neither joy nor sadness in their eyes.  
 “Behold that shade whose right hand wields the sword,” 85  
     my worthy Teacher thus began to say,  
     “who comes before the others as their lord.  
 Homer the sovereign poet is that soul. 88  
     Horace the satirist comes after him,  
     Ovid comes third, and Lucan is the last.

<sup>o</sup> *Rachel* Jacob (*Israel*) worked for Laban for seven years to win his daughter Rachel. But on the wedding night, Laban sent to Jacob's tent Rachel's sister, Leah, instead. The next day Laban agreed to give Rachel to Jacob also, on the condition that he work for him another seven years (Gen. 29:9–30).

Because we come together in that name of 'poet' which the one soul spoke alone, they do me honor—and in this do well."	91
So did I see united that sweet school of the lord of the most exalted song that like an eagle soars above the rest.	94
When they had talked together for a while they turned to me, and beckoned me to come, bringing a smile unto my Teacher's lips, And greeted me, and honored me so well	97
that they included me among their band, and made me sixth in that academy.	100
So we proceeded till we reached the light, speaking of things best kept in silence here, as in that place to speak of them was right.	103
Before a noble castle then we came. Seven times it was ringed with lofty walls, defended all around by a lovely stream.	106
Over this stream we passed as on dry land; then with those sages through the seven gates I entered, and we reached a fresh green field,	109
Where I saw souls whose eyes were grave and slow, whose looks were marked with great authority. Seldom they spoke, and held their voices low.	112
We drew away to one side of the plain to a place high and free and filled with light, that we might see them all. And there before me	115
On meadows bright as fine-enameled green, the spirits of the great were shown to me— glory it is, to see what I have seen!	118
I saw Electra with a numerous train— among them I knew Hector and Aeneas, and, in arms, Caesar with his falcon eye.	121
I saw Penthesilea and Camilla there on the other side, and King Latinus, who sat beside his child Lavinia.	124

I saw that Brutus who drove Tarquin out, Lucretia, Julia, Martia, and Cornelia; and sitting by himself, the Saladin.	127
And when I raised the lashes of my eye I saw the master of all those who know <sup>o</sup> among his wisdom-seeking family.	130
All look upon him there, all honor him; I saw the souls of Socrates and Plato where they stood nearer to him than the rest;	133
Democritus, who posits that the world is ruled by chance; Thales, Empedocles, Zeno, Diogenes, and Heraclitus,	136
And Anaxagoras, and the good collector of herbals Dioscorides, and Orpheus, Cicero, Livy, moral Seneca,	139
Geometrician Euclid, Ptolemy, Hippocrates and Galen, Avicenna, and the great Commenter, Averroes.	142
I give no reckoning of them all—the length of what I have to do so drives me on, often my words fall short of the event.	145
The company of six is cut by two, and my wise guide leads me another way, out of the quiet, into the trembling air—	148
Into a place where nothing ever shines.	151

<sup>o</sup> *the Master of all those who know*: Aristotle, whom Dante considered the greatest of philosophers.

# Canto XXXIV

## Circle Nine: Cocytus<sup>1</sup> Compound Fraud

Round Four: Judecca

The Treacherous to Their Masters

The Center

Satan

"On march the banners of the King," Virgil begins as the Poets face the last depth. He is quoting a medieval hymn, and to it he adds the distortion and perversion of all that lies about him. "On march the banners of the King—of Hell."<sup>2</sup> And there before them, in an infernal parody of Godhead, they see Satan in the distance, his great wings beating like a windmill. It is their beating that is the source of the icy wind of Cocytus, the exhalation of all evil.

All about him in the ice are strewn the sinners of the last round, JUDECCA, named for Judas Iscariot.<sup>3</sup> These are TREACHEROUS TO THEIR MASTERS. They lie completely sealed in the ice, twisted and distorted into every conceivable posture. It is impossible to speak to them, and the Poets move on to observe Satan.

He is fixed into the ice at the center to which flow all the rivers of guilt; and as he beats his great wings as if to escape, their icy wind only freezes him more surely into the polluted ice. In a grotesque parody of the Trinity, he has three faces, each a different color, and in each mouth he clamps a sinner whom he rips eternally with his teeth. JUDAS ISCARIOT is in the central mouth: BRUTUS and CASSIUS<sup>4</sup> in the mouths on either side.

1. **Cocytus** (kō sī' tās): This Greek word means "wailing."

2. **On march the banners of the King—of Hell:** The hymn was written in the sixth century by Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers. The original celebrates the Holy Cross, and is part of the service for Good Friday to be sung at the moment of uncovering the cross.

3. **Judas Iscariot** (is ker' ē ōt): The disciple who betrayed Jesus; see the Bible, Matthew 26:14, 48.

4. **BRUTUS and CASSIUS:** They took part in a plot against Julius Caesar.

Having seen all, the Poets now climb through the center, grappling hand over hand down the hairy flank of Satan himself—a last supremely symbolic action—and at last, when they have passed the center of all gravity, they emerge from Hell. A long climb from the earth's center to the Mount of Purgatory awaits them, and they push on without rest, ascending along the sides of the river Lethe, till they emerge once more to see the stars of Heaven, just before dawn on Easter Sunday.

"On march the banners of the King of Hell," my Master said. "Toward us. Look straight ahead:

can you make him out at the core of the frozen shell?"

Like a whirling windmill seen afar at twilight,  
5 or when a mist has risen from the ground—  
just such an engine rose upon my sight

stirring up such a wild and bitter wind  
I cowered for shelter at my Master's back,  
there being no other windbreak I could find.

10 I stood now where the souls of the last class  
(with fear my verses tell it) were covered wholly;  
they shone below the ice like straws in glass.

Some lie stretched out; others are fixed in place  
upright, some on their heads, some on their  
soles;

15 another, like a bow, bends foot to face.

When we had gone so far across the ice  
that it pleased my Guide to show me the foul  
creature<sup>5</sup>  
which once had worn the grace of Paradise,

20 he made me stop, and, stepping aside, he said:  
“Now see the face of Dis!<sup>6</sup> This is the place  
where you must arm your soul against all  
dread.”

Do not ask, Reader, how my blood ran cold  
and my voice choked up with fear. I cannot  
write it:  
this is a terror that cannot be told.

25 I did not die, and yet I lost life’s breath:  
imagine for yourself what I became,  
deprived at once of both my life and death.

The Emperor of the Universe of Pain  
juttet his upper chest above the ice;  
30 and I am closer in size to the great mountain

the Titans<sup>7</sup> make around the central pit,  
than they to his arms. Now, starting from this  
part,  
imagine the whole that corresponds to it!

35 If he was once as beautiful as now  
he is hideous, and still turned on his Maker,  
well may he be the source of every woe!

With what a sense of awe I saw his head  
towering above me! for it had three faces:<sup>8</sup>  
one was in front, and it was fiery red;

40 the other two, as weirdly wonderful,  
merged with it from the middle of each shoulder  
to the point where all converged at the top of  
the skull;

5. **the foul creature:** Satan.

6. **Dis** (dis): In greek mythology, the god of the lower world or the lower world itself. Here it stands for Satan.

7. **Titans:** Giant deities who were overthrown by Zeus and the Olympian gods of Greece.

8. **three faces:** Numerous interpretations of these three faces exist. What is essential to all explanation is that they be seen as perversions of the qualities of the Trinity.

the right was something between white and bile;  
the left was about the color that one finds  
45 on those who live along the banks of the Nile.

Under each head two wings rose terribly,  
their span proportioned to so gross a bird:  
I never saw such sails upon the sea.

They were not feathers—their texture and their  
form  
50 were like a bat’s wings—and he beat them so  
that three winds blew from him in one great  
storm:

it is these winds that freeze all Cocytus.  
He wept from his six eyes, and down three chins  
the tears ran mixed with bloody froth and pus.<sup>9</sup>

55 In every mouth he worked a broken sinner  
between his rake-like teeth. Thus he kept three  
in eternal pain at his eternal dinner.

For the one in front the biting seemed to play  
no part at all compared to the ripping: at times  
60 the whole skin of his back was flayed away.

“That soul that suffers most,” explained my  
Guide,  
“is Judas Iscariot, he who kicks his legs  
on the fiery chin and has his head inside.

Of the other two, who have their heads thrust  
forward,  
65 the one who dangles down from the black face  
is Brutus: note how he writhes without a word.

And there, with the huge and sinewy arms,<sup>10</sup> is the  
soul  
of Cassius,—But the night is coming on<sup>11</sup>  
and we must go, for we have seen the whole.”

9. **bloody froth and pus:** the gore of the sinners he chews, which is mixed with his saliva.

10. **huge and sinewy arms:** The Cassius who betrayed Caesar was more generally described in terms of Shakespeare’s “lean and hungry look.” Another Cassius is described by Cicero (*Catiline* III) as huge and sinewy. Dante probably confused the two.

11. **the night is coming on:** It is now Saturday evening.



JUDECCA—LUCIFER  
Gustave Doré

70 Then, as he bade, I clasped his neck, and he,  
watching for a moment when the wings  
were opened wide, reached over dexterously<sup>12</sup>

and seized the shaggy coat of the king demon;  
then grappling matted hair and frozen crusts  
75 from one tuft to another, clambered down.

When we had reached the joint where the great  
thigh  
merges into the swelling of the haunch,  
my Guide and Master, straining terribly,

turned his head to where his feet had been  
80 and began to grip the hair as if he were climbing,<sup>13</sup>  
so that I thought we moved toward Hell again.

12. **dexterously:** Skilfully.

13. **as if he were climbing:** They have passed the center of gravity and so must turn around and start climbing.

“Hold fast!” my Guide said, and his breath came  
shrill<sup>14</sup>  
with labor and exhaustion. “There is no way  
but by such stairs to rise above such evil.”

85 At last he climbed out through an opening  
in the central rock, and he seated me on the rim;  
then joined me with a nimble backward spring.

I looked up, thinking to see Lucifer  
as I had left him, and I saw instead  
90 his legs projecting high into the air.

Now let all those whose dull minds are still vexed  
by failure to understand what point it was  
I had passed through, judge if I was perplexed.

14. **his breath came shrill:** In Canto XXIII, 85, the fact that Dante breathes indicates to the Hypocrites that he is alive. Virgil's breathing is certainly a contradiction.

“Get up. Up on your feet,” my Master said.  
95 “The sun already mounts to middle tierce,<sup>15</sup>  
and a long road and hard climbing lie ahead.”

It was no hall of state we had found there,  
but a natural animal pit hollowed from rock  
with a broken floor and a close and sunless air.

100 “Before I tear myself from the Abyss,”  
I said when I had risen, “O my Master,  
explain to me my error in all this:

where is the ice? and Lucifer—how has he  
been turned from top to bottom: and how can  
the sun

105 have gone from night to day so suddenly?”

And he to me: “You imagine you are still  
on the other side of the center where I grasped  
the shaggy flank of the Great Worm of Evil

which bores through the world—you *were* while I  
climbed down,

110 but I turned myself about, you passed  
the point to which all gravities are drawn.

You are under the other hemisphere where you  
stand;  
the sky above us is the half opposed  
to that which canopies the great dry land.

115 Under the midpoint of that other sky  
the Man<sup>16</sup> who was born sinless and who lived  
beyond all blemish, came to suffer and die.

You have your feet upon a little sphere  
which forms the other face of the Judecca.

120 There it is evening when it is morning here.

**15. middle tierce:** According to the church’s division of the day for prayer, tierce is the period from about six to nine A.M. Middle tierce, therefore, is seven-thirty. In going through the center point, they have gone from night to day. They have moved ahead twelve hours.

**16. the Man:** Jesus, who suffered and died in Jerusalem, which was thought to be the middle of the earth.

And this gross Fiend and Image of all Evil  
who made a stairway for us with his hide  
is pinched and prisoned in the ice-pack still.

125 On this side he plunged down from heaven’s height,  
and the land that spread here once hid in the sea  
and fled North to our hemisphere for fright,<sup>17</sup>

And it may be that moved by that same fear,  
the one peak<sup>18</sup> that still rises on this side  
fled upward leaving this great cavern<sup>19</sup> here.”

130 Down there, beginning at the further bound  
of Beelzebub’s<sup>20</sup> dim tomb, there is a space  
not known by sight, but only by sound

of a little stream<sup>21</sup> descending through the hollow  
it has eroded from the massive stone  
135 in its endlessly entwining lazy flow.”

My Guide and I crossed over and began  
to mount that little known and lightless road  
to ascend into the shining world again.

140 He first, I second, without thought of rest  
we climbed the dark until we reached the point  
where a round opening brought in sight the blest

and beauteous shining of the Heavenly cars.  
And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.<sup>22</sup>

**17. fled North . . . for fright:** Dante believed that the Northern hemisphere was mostly land and the Southern hemisphere water. Here he explains the reason for this state of affairs.

**18. the one peak:** The Mount of Purgatory.

**19. this great cavern:** The natural animal pit of line 98. It is also “Beelzebub’s dim tomb,” line 131.

**20. Beelzebub’s** (bē el’ zə bubz): Beelzebub, which in Hebrew means “god of flies,” was another name for Satan.

**21. a little stream:** Lethe (lē’ thē). In classical mythology, the river of forgetfulness, from which souls drank before being born. In Dante’s symbolism it flows down from Purgatory, where it has washed away the memory of sin from the souls who are undergoing purification. That memory it delivers to Hell, which draws all sin to itself.

**22. Stars:** As part of his total symbolism, Dante ends each of the three divisions of the *Divine Comedy* with this word. Every conclusion of the upward soul is toward the stars, God’s shining symbols of hope and virtue. It is just before dawn of Easter Sunday that the Poets emerge—a further symbolism.

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**Reader's Response** *If you were Dante, what thoughts would you have upon viewing Satan?*

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## THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

### Interpreting

1. Why are the figures in Satan's mouth considered traitors?
2. Why does Dante choose to represent the most terrible part of Hell as a frozen lake?
3. Why does Virgil have to carry Dante out of Hell by climbing over Satan?
4. Dante himself called punishment "the sword of heaven." (a) First explain the meaning of this statement. (b) Then tell how it applies to Canto XXXIV.
5. What does Dante learn from this experience?

### Applying

6. What elements in Dante's depiction of the pit of Hell are designed to strike terror in the hearts of readers?

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Understanding Personification

Satan is the quintessential representation of evil. In the Bible he is represented as a slithering serpent, hissing his treachery to Eve. In Dante's description of Satan, he is the "Emperor of the Universe of Pain." However, he is rendered motionless in the ice. His kingdom and therefore his power is thus limited.

1. Which details make Satan particularly repulsive?
2. In what way does Dante's description of Satan indicate that evil is not necessarily frightening for the Godly human being?

## CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

### Avoiding "Translationese"

The translator is confronted with many problems when he or she begins to transfer a literary work from one language to another. One of these problems is how to avoid "translationese"; or how to make a translation sound natural and appeal to a particular audience, while at the same time being faithful to the meaning of the original language.

This problem is heightened when the text is in verse, as it is in the *Divine Comedy*. The translator must decide whether to use prose or poetry. If the translator uses verse, then will he or she use a poetic form that is familiar to the intended audience? If there is a gap between what the audience expects and what the translator offers, it is usually because the style of the translation is not appropriate for its public.

1. Imagine that you are John Ciardi preparing your translation of the *Inferno*. Why did you decide to translate it using verse instead of prose?
2. Imagine that you are translating the work. What decisions would you make that are different from Ciardi's?

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Preparing Translations

Reread these lines from the third canto:

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.  
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.  
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.

SACRED JUSTICE MOVED MY ARCHITECT.  
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,  
PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.

ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR  
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND.  
ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.

Paraphrase Ciardi's translation of Dante. The simplest tool at your disposal is a dictionary of synonyms. For example, *woe* could be substituted by *sorrow*, *pain*, or *tragedy*. *Forsaken* could be replaced by the words *abandoned*, *forgotten*, or *forlorn*. Try to find equivalent words for every important noun, verb, or adjective in this passage. Pick out the most striking or appropriate synonyms and then put them together to create your own version of the inscription. As you revise your work, see if a different ordering of the material might be more effective or poetic. Do you think your version conveys Dante's meaning well? Is it easy to read and understand?

# GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

## *from the Inferno, Canto XXXIV*

### Commentary

**Personification.** **Personification** is the portrayal of a concept by granting it a human identity. The Greeks and Romans personified phenomena by creating gods that evoked aspects of nature. Poseidon personified the sea and Apollo the sun.

Dante uses both historical and mythological figures to represent the various sins. He goes to great lengths to fashion them an appropriate punishment. In fact, it is the punishment itself that makes the reader aware of the sins that these people have committed. A good example would be Paolo and Francesca. As Dante discovers, they are the personification of lust. They are swept around this circle of hell just as they were swept away by their passions in life. This idea of appropriate punishment is linked to personification. Together, sin, its personification, and punishment create an allegorical system.

Of course, Satan is the ultimate personification of evil. In him, evil is depicted as a hideous three-faced monster. He is frozen into the very bottom of Hell, isolated as far as possible from God and humanity, a suitable punishment for the cold-hearted betrayal of the ultimate good.

### Writing

Films often personify evil. They may represent evil as a demonic car or as a plant. Create your own personification of evil.

### Commentary

This is the end of an odyssey into Hell. But for Dante, this is merely the first of three stages of his pilgrimage toward salvation. In the cantos you have read, you have seen how Dante creates a transition from one circle of hell to another. Dante succeeds by making constant use of bridges, river crossings, and other images of travel. When he is confronted with an obstacle, Dante conveniently faints, allowing Virgil or his own narrative to carry him from one circle to another.

At the end of the *Inferno*, Dante must prepare for the continuation of his voyage in yet another realm. Satan is used as a bridge over which Virgil and Dante climb into the next world. Virgil must carry the weakened Dante over the obstacle, as he did many times before in the *Inferno*. What is new here is the contrast that Dante uses to lead his reader to a new world of hope and salvation. He contrasts the dark world of Hell with the dazzling light of Purgatory. And so he moves from the "lightless" to the "shining" world. This image summarizes Dante's journey.