

Read and
Annotate -
What are the big
ideas in Dante's
bio? Take notes
on at least three
facts on this page.

1) Before
2) During
Dante was
imprisoned

Commentary

from the Inferno, Canto III

Imagery. Imagery is the use of words and details to create vivid pictures in the reader's mind. One way the writer creates vivid images is through repetition. From the beginning of this canto, the reader should share in Dante's trepidation, which is underscored by the anaphora, the insistent repetition, found in the inscription on the Gate of Hell: "I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE. / I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE. / I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW." This repetition echoes the never-ending punishments to be found in Hell and reminds us of the endless nature of this suffering. The "Neutral" people, those who chose neither side in religious or political controversies, constantly run around in a large circle. They can never stop running. Dante repeats the notion of circling and entrapment frequently in this canto.

Another way of creating vivid images is by appealing to the senses. Dante assaults our sense of hearing in order to convey the horror of this situation. Before he even sees the sinners, he hears "sighs and cries and wails . . . A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled / in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill / and sounds of blows, all intermingled . . ." He also appeals to our sense of sight. When Virgil says "look, and pass on," Dante finally sees this horde, goaded on by wasps and hornets, and even recognizes a few of them. By delaying this recognition, Dante emphasizes the unfamiliar nature of this situation. The sinners are grotesque and deformed by their torment.

After this first frightening encounter with Hell, the two voyagers are confronted by the boatman, Charon. But his anger is mitigated when Virgil reminds him of the higher authority that has instigated Dante's pilgrimage. Thus is established the rhythm of menace and protection that moves the narrative along through Dante's trials.

In describing the passage over the Acheron, Dante uses several images to evoke the staggering numbers of the damned. They are compared to the leaves in autumn, to flocks of birds. It is no wonder that Dante describes all his senses as "shattered," since they must take in sights and sounds that are completely unfamiliar to him. He is clearly overwhelmed by what he sees, and his inability to continue his narration conveys the unspeakably horrible nature of his surroundings. Thus silence becomes crucial to Dante's literary method.

Writing

Have you ever been to a house of horrors in an amusement park, or seen a horror movie? Write down a list of things that shocked or frightened you. What exactly made these details seem horrible?

Canto III

The Vestibule of Hell The Opportunists

The Poets pass the Gate of Hell and are immediately assailed by cries of anguish. Dante sees the first of the souls in torment. They are THE OPPORTUNISTS, those souls who in life were neither for good nor evil but only for themselves. Mixed with them are those outcasts who took no sides in the Rebellion of the Angels.¹ They are neither in Hell nor out of it. Eternally unclassified, they race round and round pursuing a wavering banner that runs forever before them through the dirty air; and as they run they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets, who sting them and produce a constant flow of blood and putrid matter which trickles down the bodies of the sinners and is feasted upon by loathsome worms and maggots who coat the ground.

The law of Dante's Hell is the law of symbolic retribution. As they sinned so are they punished. They took no sides, therefore they are given no place. As they pursued the ever-shifting illusion of their own advantage, changing their courses with every changing wind, so they pursue eternally an elusive, ever-shifting banner. As their sin was a darkness, so they move in darkness. As their own guilty conscience pursued them, so they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets. And as their actions were a moral filth, so they run eternally through the filth of worms and maggots which they themselves feed.

Dante recognizes several, among them POPE CELESTINE V,² but without delaying to speak to any of these souls, the Poets move on to ACHERON,³ the first of the rivers of Hell. Here the newly arrived

souls of the damned gather and wait for monstrous CHARON⁴ to ferry them over to punishment. Charon recognizes Dante as a living man and angrily refuses him passage. Virgil forces Charon to serve them, but Dante swoons with terror, and does not reawaken until he is on the other side.

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.

5 I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,
PRIMORDIAL⁵ LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.

ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR⁶
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I
STAND.⁷

ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.⁸

10 These mysteries I read cut into stone
above a gate. And turning I said: "Master,
what is the meaning of this harsh inscription?"

And he then as initiate to novice:⁹

15 "Here must you put by all division of spirit
and gather your soul against all cowardice.

4. CHARON (ker'on)

5. PRIMORDIAL (pri mór' dē al): Existing from the beginning.

6. ONLY . . . WEAR: The Angels, the Empyrean (the highest heaven), and the First Matter are the elements time cannot wear, for they will last to all time. Man, however, in his mortal state, is not eternal. The Gate of Hell, therefore, was created before man.

7. AND BEYOND . . . STAND: So odious is sin to God that there can be no end to its just punishment.

8. ABANDON . . . HERE: The admonition, of course, is to the damned and not to those who come on Heaven-sent errands. The Harrowing of Hell (see Canto IV, note 8) provided the only exemption from this decree, and that only through the direct intercession of Christ.

9. as initiate to novice: as one who knows to one who does not.

1. the Rebellion of the Angels: In Christian tradition, Satan and other angels who rebelled against God were cast out of heaven; see the Bible, Revelation 12:7-9.

2. POPE CELESTINE V: He lived from 1215 to 1296.

3. ACHERON (ak' or än')

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at least three ideas
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This is the place I told you to expect.
Here you shall pass among the fallen people,
souls who have lost the good of intellect."

20 So saying, he put forth his hand to me,
and with a gentle and encouraging smile
he led me through the gate of mystery.

Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled
on the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents
toiled

25 in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill
and sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised
tumult and pandemonium¹⁰ that still

whirls on the air forever dirty with it
as if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,
30 holding my head in horror, cried: "Sweet Spirit,

what souls are these who run through this black
haze?"
And he to me: "These are the nearly soulless
whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.

They are mixed here with that despicable corps
35 of angels who were neither God nor Satan,
but only for themselves. The High Creator

scourged¹¹ them from Heaven for its perfect beauty,
and Hell will not receive them since the wicked
might feel some glory over them." And I:

40 "Master, what gnaws at them so hideously
their lamentation stuns the very air?"
"They have no hope of death," he answered me,

"and in their blind and unattaining state
their miserable lives have sunk so low
45 that they must envy every other fate.

10. **pandemonium** (pan' də mō' nē əm): A word coined by
Milton to describe the demons' capital in hell, it now means
any place or scene of noise and wild disorder.
11. **scourged**: Whipped

No word of them survives their living season.
Mercy and Justice deny them even a name.
Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on."

I saw a banner there upon a mist.
50 Circling and circling, it seemed to scorn all
pause.
So it ran on, and still behind it pressed

a never-ending rout of souls in pain.
I had not thought death had undone so many
as passed before me in that mournful train.

55 And some I knew among them; last of all
I recognized the shadow of that soul
who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.¹²

At once I understood for certain: these
were of that retrograde¹³ and faithless crew
60 hateful to God and to His enemies.

These wretches never born and never dead
ran naked in a swarm of wasps and hornets
that goaded them the more the more they fled,

and made their faces stream with bloody gouts
65 of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet
to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and
maggots.

Then looking onward I made out a throng
assembled on the beach of a wide river,
whereupon I turned to him: "Master, I long

70 to know what souls these are, and what strange
usage

12. **who, in . . . Denial**: This is almost certainly intended to
be Celestine V, who became Pope in 1294. He was a man of
saintly life, but allowed himself to be convinced by a priest
named Benedetto that his soul was in danger since no man
could live in the world without being damned. In fear for his
soul he withdrew from all worldly affairs and renounced the
papacy. Benedetto promptly assumed the mantle himself and
became Boniface VIII, a Pope who became for Dante a symbol
of all the worst corruptions of the church. Dante also blamed
Boniface and his intrigues for many of the evils that befell the
city of Florence. Celestine's great guilt is that his cowardice (in
selfish terror for his own welfare) served as the door through
which so much evil entered the church.

13. **retrograde**: Moving backward.

makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be in this infected light." At which the Sage:

"All this shall be made known to you when we stand on the joyless beach of Acheron." And I cast down my eyes, sensing a reprimand

in what he said, and so walked at his side in silence and ashamed until we came through the dead cavern to that sunless tide.

There, steering toward us in an ancient ferry came an old man¹⁴ with white bush of hair, bellowing: "Woe to you depraved souls! Bury

here and forever all hope of Paradise:

I come to lead you to the other shore, into eternal dark, into fire and ice.

And you who are living yet, I say begone from these who are dead." But when he saw me stand against his violence he began again:

"By other windings¹⁵ and by other steerage shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here!

A lighter craft than mine must give you passage."

And my Guide to him: "Charon, bite back your spleen: this has been willed where what is willed must be, and is not yours to ask what it may mean."¹⁶

14. an old man: Charon. He is the ferryman of dead souls across the Acheron in all classical mythology.

15. By other windings: Charon recognizes Dante not only as a living man but as a soul in grace, and knows, therefore, that the Infernal Ferry was not intended for him. He is probably referring to the fact that souls destined for Purgatory and Heaven assemble not at his ferry point, but on the banks of the Tiber (a river that runs through Rome), from which they are transported by an Angel.

16. Charon, bite back your spleen . . . to ask what it may mean: Virgil tells Charon to suppress his bad temper, because God has ordained that Dante shall make this journey. Charon has no right to question or oppose God's orders.

The steersman of that march of ruined souls, who wore a wheel of flame around each eye, stifled the rage that shook his woolly jowls.

But those unmanned and naked spirits there turned pale with fear and their teeth began to chatter at sound of his crude bellow. In despair

they blasphemed God,¹⁷ their parents, their time on earth, the race of Adam, and the day and the hour and the place and the seed and the womb that gave them birth.

17. they blasphemed God: They cursed God. The souls of the damned are not permitted to repent, for repentance is a divine grace.

CHARON, THE RIVER ACHERON, INFERNO III
Gustave Doré



from the *Inferno*, Canto III 631

Take notes, highlight
at least three ideas
on this page.

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But all together they drew to that grim shore
where all must come who lose the fear of God.
105 Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

and demon Charon with eyes like burning coals
herds them in, and with a whistling oar
flails on the stragglers to his wake¹⁸ of souls.

As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down
110 until the branch stands bare above its tatters
spread on the rustling ground, so one by one

the evil seed of Adam in its Fall¹⁹
cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore
and streamed away like birds who hear their call.

115 So they are gone over that shadowy water,
and always before they reach the other shore
a new noise stirs on this, and new throngs
gather.

"My son," the courteous Master said to me,
"all who die in the shadow of God's wrath
converge to this from every clime and
120 country.

And all pass over eagerly, for here
Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so

18. **wake:** A watch over a corpse before burial, with a pun on waking up.

19. **Fall:** This word has at least three different meanings: the season fall, the fall of all humans with the sin of Adam and Eve, and the fall of individual sinners.

their dread turns wish; they yearn for what they
fear.²⁰

No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;
125 therefore if Charon rages at your presence
you will understand the reason for his cursing."

When he had spoken, all the twilight country
shook so violently, the terror of it
bathes me with sweat even in memory:

the tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of wind
130 that spewed itself in flame on a red sky,
and all my shattered senses left me. Blind,

like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,²¹
I stumbled into darkness and went down.

20. **they yearn . . . fear:** Hell (allegorically Sin) is what the souls of the damned really wish for. Hell is their actual and deliberate choice, for divine grace is denied to none who wish for it in their hearts. The damned must, in fact, deliberately harden their hearts to God in order to become damned. Christ's grace is sufficient to save all who wish for it.

21. **swoon:** The act of fainting. This device (repeated at the end of Canto V) serves a double purpose. The first is technical: Dante uses it to cover a transition. We are never told how he crossed Acheron; for that would involve certain narrative matters he can better deal with when he crosses Styx (stiks), another river of the underworld, in Canto VII. The second is to provide a point of departure for a theme that is carried through the entire descent: the theme of Dante's emotional reaction to Hell. These two swoons early in the descent show him most susceptible to the grief about him. As he descends, pity leaves him, and he even goes so far as to add to the torments of one sinner. The allegory is clear: we must harden ourselves against every sympathy for sin.

Reader's Response Imagine that you are
Dante reading the inscription cut in stone
above the gate. What would be your
reaction? *not humanly*

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Clarifying

1. What is Virgil's advice to Dante, spoken at the Gate of Hell?
2. Who are the souls tortured in this canto?
3. What is Charon's reaction to Dante's attempt to cross the river Acheron?
4. How does Virgil silence Charon?

Interpreting

5. What message does this canto provide about those who cannot or will not make a commitment to God? Support your answer with details from the canto.
6. Based on what you know of his life, why might Dante harbor special repugnance toward the indecisive?
7. (a) Find three examples of the use of assonance, or repetition of vowel sounds, in this canto. (b) What effect is created by the use of assonance?
8. (a) Does the image of souls as fallen leaves merely convey a sense of great numbers, or does it contribute to the despairing tone of this canto? (b) What are the other possible interpretations of this image?

Applying

9. Charon tells the souls to "Bury / here and forever all hope of Paradise." Is hope necessary for happiness? Explain your answer.

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Interpreting Imagery

In this canto Dante begins his description of Hell, which becomes for the reader an assault on all the senses. As we read his harrowing descriptions of the sounds, sights, and even smells of Hell, we come to share in Dante's repugnance at the horrors the poet encounters.

1. List the sounds that Dante uses to convey the terrors of hell.
2. List the details that appeal to the sense of sight.
3. Which images hint at the sense of touch, smell, or taste? Why would he have chosen these particular images?
4. Why do you think Dante dwells on the physical realities of Hell?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Understanding Cause and Effect

A **cause** is what makes something happen. An **effect** is what actually happens. In Dante's vision a person's sins cause his or her placement in Hell.

1. (a) Why are the nearly soulless in Hell? (b) How does their punishment fit their sin?
2. (a) Why are the despicable corps of angels in Hell? (b) How does their punishment fit their crime?

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

Appreciating Dialogue

Dialogue is conversation between characters. Dante's journey and growth are established by his constant dialogue with his guide and teacher, Virgil. This dialogue gives direction and purpose to the potentially meaningless sufferings that Dante witnesses in Hell. Dante relies on Virgil to guide and protect him. The relationship is one of teacher to pupil, or as Dante states, of "initiate to novice." Dante, in this canto, consistently asks questions that demonstrate his inexperience and awe toward the mysteries of Hell. Virgil allays Dante's fears with detailed explanation. Their dialogue evolves into one moral voice.

1. Find three questions that Dante asks of Virgil and put them in your own words.
2. What are Virgil's responses to Dante's questions?
3. Based on their dialogue, how would you rate Virgil as a teacher? Support your answer.

THINKING AND WRITING

Describing Scenes of Horror, Scenes of Woe

Imagine yourself as Dante. Take your list of details from a horror movie or a house of horrors. Do you think Dante would have reacted to the same things you did? Using as a model Dante's ability to capture and describe the horrifying, write a multiparagraph essay describing your experience in a house of horrors or watching a horror film. As you reread your work, try to create images that are vivid and realistic.

from the *Inferno*, Canto III 633

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at least three ideas
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