

Dante's Inferno

- Humanities Honors Assignment, First Semester, 2007 -

Those of you who have accepted the challenge of doing honors work have patiently waited for this semester's assignments— *well, your wait is hereby rewarded!* Here, then, is the first long term assignment for this first semester. We have some vacation days coming (Thanksgiving Break, for instance) which should help some of you find the time to read and write; the important thing is to get it done without putting it off until the last minute!

Please have all reading completed as soon as possible, but be at least through Canto 17 by our first Friday morning session, Nov. 2

Reading & Writing Enrichment Activity:

So we continue our exploration of *The Inferno*, the first volume of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, possibly one of the most influential works (especially for artists and writers) of the Western world. You are asked to read the whole work, write a response to a focus question or two, and participate in a group discussion. In other words...

1) **Read *The Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri.** This novel is easily available in libraries and in inexpensive used paperback editions (I recommend John Ciardi's very readable translation).

It is important to remember what the author is doing: Dante Alighieri, believes that before achieving moral redemption, an individual must take a hard look at evil both in the world and in himself. Only by confronting inner evil can people can achieve self-knowledge, which is the first step toward redemption.

Dante also suggests that people should not be expected to make their journey alone; they need a guide to help them. For Dante's own journey, as described in his book, he chose the poet Virgil to guide him through hell. Thus,

Dante is not so much providing a literal geography of hell as he is commenting on a psychology of sin, not just in the afterlife, but in this one. While he populates his hell with particular people, some very famous, some probably known primarily to Dante's local contemporaries, please don't get hung up on characters you don't recognize. Notes in your text (or online helps) can solve more important mysteries, but you can easily catch Dante's point without knowing the story behind every single inhabitant of Dante's hell. Just keep reading, with an eye to the big picture.

2) **Take the opportunity to browse a few of the many websites dedicated to *Dante's Inferno*.** These sites provide study helps, great graphic tours of Dante's hell, and further links to some of the most important art inspired by this work. A quick Google search will yield hundreds of sites- some are better than others- but here are a few worth special attention:

- **A Dante Internet Primer** by Lisa Hudgins:

<http://www.libsci.sc.edu/bob/class/clis710/StudentWebGuides/Danteprimer.htm>

- **Dante's Inferno: Interactive Map:** http://www.allectomedia.com/dante/dante_map.cfm

- **Digital Dante** at Columbia University: <http://dante.ilt.columbia.edu/new/>

- **Prose Paraphrase: Inferno-Dr.Goëtes:** <http://24.24.31.212/literature/POL-DC-TEXT-Inferno.htm>

- **Danteworlds-** U. of Texas,Austin: <http://danteworlds.laits.utexas.edu/utopia/index2.html>

- **The Inferno:** Translated by James Finn Cotter http://www.italianstudies.org/comedy/Inferno_int.htm

Helpful Introduction and convenient arrangement by Canto, with notes right beside the text

- **Dante in SparkNotes:** <http://www.sparknotes.com/poetry/inferno/>

- **Dante World Lit Homepage:** includes great links to Dante-inspired visual art, John Ciardi's summary of *The Inferno*, etc: <http://jade.cccd.edu/Andrade/WorldLitI2332/Dante/dante/DanteHomePage.html>

Eventually, you will be asked to write an essay on one of the prompts below. For our first session on Nov. 2, you should have at least a very rough draft (complete with some notes and specific textual references from your reading thus far) on one of these that will allow you to discuss your question with others in our group.

3) **Complete this writing assignment** to prepare yourself to participate in a group discussion of your reading: Choose *one* of the following prompts to write a thoughtful, final-draft essay of two to three pages. Whichever you choose, be sure to provide specific evidence from the text to support your thesis.

1. Select a single incident in *Inferno*, and, by a detailed discussion of what happens in that incident (both to the sinners and to the onlookers and to the reader), explore the significance of that episode. What does it contribute to the total effect of the poem? (e.g. *What is the author doing, and how is he doing it?*) Does the incident raise any challenging questions about or provide important insights into main features of the poem?
2. Dante's vision of hell has a very carefully worked out structure, which not only indicates punishments for particular crimes but which also ranks sins according to their seriousness. There is a deep sense of *poetic justice*. Discuss the importance of this structure of punishments, paying particular attention to what it reveals about Dante's vision of the individual, society, and the various ways these can become corrupt.
3. In what sense is Dante's *Inferno* a voyage of discovery about the poet-narrator's own self and culture, a necessary descent before he can attain proper spiritual insight? What does Dante (the character in the poem) learn as a result of his trip to hell?
4. It is apparent that in Medieval philosophy reason and faith are not antithetical. With reference to some specific parts of the *Divine Comedy*, discuss how Dante understands the relationship between them.
5. According to St. Augustine and other Medieval philosophers, evil is not a positive substance but a negation. The wrongdoer sins not by turning toward something that is inherently evil, but by turning away from what is supremely good. Discuss some of the specific ways in which this view is reflected in the *Divine Comedy*.

4) **Bring this writing (fully complete in final draft form!) to our second session-date to be announced.**

Be prepared to demonstrate a real understanding of your reading.

And finally, the fun part at our final session...

5) **The Grand Finale: Design your Own Hell!** After the reading, the writing, and the ever-stimulating discussion, you'll be ready to take on your own personal creative response to Dante's vision. Who would you put in your Hell? What are they in for? What would you do to them once they were in there? Would you just throw all the sinners in, lock the door, and turn up the heat? What would be the purpose of your Hell? All we ask is that you try to stay in the spirit of Dante: make the logic of your poetic justice apparent; why do the particular punishments fit the particular crimes you depict?

As a college professor who gave this assignment to his students put it: "This is quite an assignment -- one that any artist or author might take up as a challenge. Dante Alighieri, tackling this assignment with the fervor of an ardent Catholic Classicist and a bitter political exile, created a highly regimented Hell. He developed a hierarchy of sins in the tradition of Greek natural philosophy [tempered somewhat with Christian theology] and provided examples for each sin in well-known figures in 14th century Italy as well as legendary Greeks and Romans. For good measure and personal satisfaction, he threw in his numerous political enemies as well. Even though he showed some personal bias, his work was rather thorough; I'll give him an A+ for his excellent project. Of course, this is the time-honored tradition of taking someone else's work and adding on to it."

We suggest that you play to your personal strength here:

Writers among you could concentrate your efforts to add a canto: create a new wing to an existing circle

of hell, or even a brand new circle! This could make an excellent parody or vehicle for social satire, though, like Dante, you may even make some very profound points.

Visual artists could take inspiration from generations of other artist who, moved by Dante's exceedingly visual language, have created their own representation and interpretation of particular scenes. Again, you could adapt this tradition to depict *your own* version of hell.

Performing artists (musicians, dancers, dramatists, film makers) could obviously use their preferred medium to present their own vision of eternal punishment. A recording (audio or video) of your performance might make it easier to share.