

## LIT 165: Imaginary Worlds

### The Inferno: Cantos I – V



**Directions:** Your group will be assigned a specific set of questions from the list below. Working together, explore, discuss, and then articulate an answer to each of the questions you are assigned as thoughtfully and as thoroughly as you can.

#### Canto I: The Dark Wood

- How does Dante describe the “dark wood” he wakes to find himself in at the start of Canto I? What kind of place do you imagine from the way he describes it? Do these places still exist today? What are the modern “dark woods”? Who are the people you know or know of who seem lost in a modern “dark wood”?
- What’s the significance of Dante “waking up” HALFWAY through the course of his life? (Do you think he has a reason for saying “our life” instead of “his” life?) He says he was so “full of sleep” that he can’t even tell when he began to lose his way, so now he’s lost, disoriented, stuck somewhere he doesn’t even remember coming to. What wakes him up “halfway” through his journey?
- How do you understand, metaphorically, the “sleeping” state that Dante was in before he woke up in the dark wood?
- Stay with the image of Dante waking up in a strange, dark, savage, tangled, rough place—a place he doesn’t entirely recognize and which he can’t remember getting to. It could almost be the same as waking up from a drunken stupor, a bad bender, couldn’t it? What is that feeling, and why is it at the beginning of the *Inferno*? If you imagine yourself in his shoes, what state do you begin to realize Dante is in?
- Dante rides an emotional rollercoaster in Canto I, experiencing a range of feelings that change rapidly. One of his more vivid emotions is fear. Is fear a natural or necessary byproduct of confusion? In lines 4-6, he says that the woods were so wild that he just remembering them makes him feel “the old fear stirring: death is hardly more bitter.” What fear could a person have that might be almost, if not more, terrifying than the fear of death? What’s the difference between fear and panic? Is it possible for there to be anything positive or beneficial about Dante’s terror?
- There are other vivid symbolic elements in Canto I: the “light” which appears majestically but is unattainable; the threatening “dark” of the woods; the three beasts who block Dante’s way—to name a few. As “obstacles” or barriers the beasts are highly effective. Forget for a moment that three beasts are “symbols”—how would you respond to them if they were blocking your path?
- Not sure if he’s “man or shade”—a real person or a figment of his imagination—Dante cries to Virgil for help, and Virgil offers to lead him on a “timeless” path through an “eternal realm.” He seems to be offering Dante the chance to see things he’s never seen before, but that he needs to see if he’s going to get out of his rut—his overwhelming confusion and moral disorientation. Why does Virgil emphasize that Dante should “choose” to follow him (l.l. 88-90)? Why do you think Dante has such immediate confidence in Virgil to be his guide? Does Dante’s confidence in Virgil mean he’s found the right path?

#### Canto II: Dante’s Doubt and Virgil’s Persuasion

- Daylight is departing as the Canto begins. What mood does that set? In what sense is Dante “alone”? What’s the double struggle he names? Whose perspective are we getting in those first few verses—Dante the Pilgrim (the character in the story) or Dante the Poet (the narrator of the story)? What’s the difference?
- Dante the Poet invokes the muses (an epic convention), but not for inspiration exactly—it’s pretty unconventional after all. He seems to be asking for the power to set down what’s in his *memory*. Why does he emphasize memory here?
- What’s the effect of Dante comparing himself to Aeneas (a great Roman epic hero) and Paul (a Christian hero)?

- Virgil takes notice of Dante’s fear. He calls it “cowardice,” and compares it to the “trick of vision” that “startles a shying beast.” Why does Virgil so bluntly compare Dante’s fear to that of a “shying beast”? What’s the implication? While Dante is tripping all over himself trying to explain how he’s like one who “unchooses his own choice” Virgil tries to “ease his burden of fear.” What about Virgil’s tale eases Dante’s fears?
- Notice that Beatrice instructs Virgil to *persuade* Dante, knowing that no one can “command” him; he has to make the choice himself. What simile is used to emphasize Dante’s reaction when he hears that his beloved Beatrice is interested in helping him?
- Notice, again, the emotional rollercoaster ride; as he sets out, he’s blooming and full of confidence (much like the end of Canto I). Is he able to sustain this feeling?

### Canto III: The Outskirts of the Inferno

- The Inferno proper has a “gate” (remember the Gate at the end of Genesis, Chapter 3?)—it will contain a “city”—though we won’t reach the actual city walls until Canto X, when Virgil and Dante get stopped at another gate, the one at the entrance to the city of Dis. Does the fact that the Inferno is preceded by a gate have any special resonance? For instance, a gated entrance seems to announce a specifically human place. What do you think is the significance of making Hell into a city?
- Read the inscription over the Gate very carefully. What does it tell you about this place?
- Dante asks Virgil to explain the inscription—notice the nature of their “teacher/pupil” relationship. Why does Virgil instruct Dante to leave his fear and his distrust behind?
- Notice how Dante is reduced to weeping (line 20) just as soon as he passes the Gate? What is he reacting to? What does his reaction tell you about him?
- Who are the Neutrals? Look closely at Virgil’s description beginning at line 30. At line 37 Dante asks about the nature of their punishment. We get our first exposure, as readers, to the Infernal system of justice known as “contrapasso.” The nature of the punishment is intimately related to the nature of the crime (At *Danteworlds* it’s explained, “Just as in life they... , so now in hell they...” – or “Because in life they failed/refused to..., now in hell they...”). How does the punishment of the Neutrals seem to fit their crime?
- Like us, Dante is struggling to understand what he’s seeing. Then comes a moment when the light bulb seems to click on, when he really seems to understand who these sinners are, and the meaning of what they’ve done to deserve their punishment. What triggers this understanding?
- At line 60 Dante asks Virgil a question but gets the brush off. Why doesn’t Virgil answer him? Isn’t he the teacher, the guide? Why does Dante feel so abashed? Is this a rift in their relationship?
- Charon, the vividly drawn boatman ferrying the dead souls across the Acheron, is a classical figure borrowed from Virgil, who borrowed it from Homer. He offers Dante an “anti-greeting” that’s more like a curse. Notice how Virgil immediately steps in and shouts him down with an effective rebuke. Analyze what he says? (Compare it to the other exchanges between Virgil and the Inferno’s demons as they appear over the next several Cantos; Virgil’s rebukes subtly change, culminating in a crisis in Canto IX.)
- Look closely at the spectacular simile Dante uses to describe the movement of sinners towards Charon’s ferry (remember, Dante uses similes for emphasis). He compares them to leaves falling from a tree, but combines that image with the image of a falcon lured by its master’s call. Is there anything striking about his use of these two images?
- What causes Dante to faint at the end of the Canto? Why does he become overwhelmed, in your opinion?

### Canto IV: Limbo

- Dante “wakes up” again at the beginning of Canto IV. How is the waking up different from his waking up in Canto I? Has there been any progression?
- Attention to emotion shifts from Dante to Virgil, as Dante misreads Virgil’s pity for fear. Is there some significance to this mistake? Is there any kind of relationship between these two emotions? Where else have you heard “pity and fear” grouped together? In misreading Virgil, is Dante the Pilgrim being stupid, or is Dante the Poet trying to emphasize something significant here? Does Dante’s mistake irritate Virgil in any way? Why would it?
- Notice how Virgil berates Dante for not asking questions when in the previous Canto he told him not to ask questions. How do you understand this inconsistency? Do you think the inconsistency has any particular effect on Dante?
- Virgil reveal something about himself when he claims to have no fear and still a lot of pity. How do you interpret this in light of his instructions to Dante at the gate in Canto III? (You have to use your

- “hindsight”—the style of the book is to build on what’s come before, remember. What you’ve just learned as you go on helps you understand where you’ve been. The past is always being integrated into the present.)
- Why is Dante so covert and careful in his question to Virgil about anyone ever leaving Limbo?
  - Dante is accepted into the ring of great poets. No false modesty there. What does this tell us about him, about his aspirations for this work we’re reading?
  - Why do you think the Castle is described in such detail?
  - When Virgil and Dante walk on water, that’s miraculous. It parallels another character who walks on water later, in Canto IX. Is there any link?
  - Notice how the end of this Canto transitions to the next; they peer into a place “with no light in it.” What seems different about the end of this Canto? Do you notice any progression?

## **Canto V, Paolo and Francesca**

- Does the beginning of Canto V suggest a particular shape to the landscape?
- Notice, another “gate,” another entrance. There are many gates and portals and entrances in this poem. What do you think their function might be?
- Notice the depiction of Minos. This is a character borrowed from Virgil, who borrowed it from the ancient Greeks. In Greek myth, Minos was a great judge. Virgil makes him the judge of the underworld, a judge of the dead. But Dante transforms him further into what we see here: a monster, a kind of demon, like Charon with his flaming eyes. What human qualities and inhuman qualities does Minos seem to embody?
- What is the “contrapasso” of this level, the second circle? What is the crime and its punishment? What is the logic behind it?
- Observe Dante’s use of bird imagery. He uses the images of three kinds of birds throughout this Canto to make vivid the images of the souls in the air, swept by the winds. How do they represent a “hierarchy,” an attempt to lend a sense of order to this place?
- Carefully observe Francesca’s speech to Dante. What is it that propels Paolo and Francesca towards Dante? Is it the same force that has already been shown to have great pull in Dante and Virgil?
- Analyze Francesca’s speech. What does it reveal about her character?
- Do you find it “romantic” the way Francesca and Paolo are together even in Hell? Is the message “true love survives even in hell”? Do you find the image of Paolo clinging to Francesca romantic or tragic or comic? In what ways does it echo the conventions of “courtly love”? How might this relate to Dante, who was a celebrated poet in the courtly love tradition?
- What is Dante’s response to Francesca and Paolo? What does this response tell us about his understanding of the Inferno?