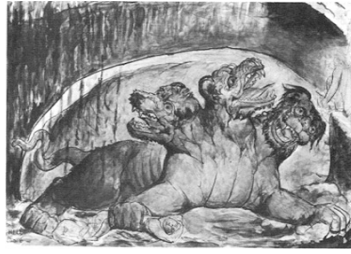


Structure in the Inferno



An alert reading of these early cantos helps us identify an underlying unity that turns out to be a unity for the work as a whole. There's a repeating structure that guides what tends to happen in each circle the travelers pass through. It's not a boring, repetitive structure; there's plenty of variation, and along with the repeating elements, we encounter many unique ones that keep the work fresh and surprising. By becoming attuned to this underlying structure, we become more able to notice interesting, subtle changes or differences within it, and it's these small (and big) variations which often help us identify key developments in character and theme.

Underlying Structure

- Description of the area
- Demon threatens/Virgil protects
- Description of "sin" and "contrapasso" (from the Italian word for "retribution")
- Interaction with "sinners"
- Transition to next area

Sometimes the order of these elements will vary, but they comprise most of what happens in each circle.

Description of the area

One aspect of the greatness of this amazing work is the vivid nature of Dante's descriptions as we travel through the Inferno. The graphically rendered "sets" seem real because Dante uses such powerful sensory language to evoke them. This "other world" becomes a vivid world we recognize, not unlike our own. We feel the misery of the atmosphere and the suffering of the sinners. We hear, feel, see, smell, touch and even taste the foulness of the place. Other times, Dante employs vivid figurative language to convey a mental image of his imaginary world. The similes that pop up here and there are used sparingly but with great effect to describe everything from the Pilgrim's emotional state to the uncanny way souls flock to Charon on their way to their place in hell. Dante's descriptions are always vivid and always make us feel that we're in a real place rather than an imaginary one.

Demon threatens/Virgil Protects

Many of the demons that the travelers encounter are half-human, half-beast, creatures borrowed from Virgil, who borrowed them from classical Greek sources. Either these creatures aren't quite human souls or they represent the most bestial aspects of our nature and are therefore incapable of rising above the level of the inferno.

The **three beasts** in the dark woods are the first infernal creatures Dante meets, even though he isn't actually in the inferno yet. Virgil saves him from the she-wolf, who threatens to tear him apart. They leave the woods and eventually encounter **Charon**, the ferryman who shuffles boatloads of the damned on their way into the inferno. He is the first demon within the inferno who threatens the travelers. Virgil, invoking the higher power, deflects him without much difficulty; the same is true when they meet **Minos** outside the second circle. Minos' serpentine tail whips in circles around his body as the victim stands waiting to see how many loops it will make: where the tail stops determines the circle to which the sinner will descend. In Greek myth Minos is the wise judge of Crete; Virgil borrows him to perform as judge in Hades in the *Aeneid*. Dante transforms him further, turning him into a monstrous kind of beaurocratic functionary, assigning God's justice with a machine-like efficiency. **Cerberus** is another creature from antiquity, guarding the third circle where the gluttonous are punished. Virgil throws clods of earth into Cerberus' three mouths to placate him and the travelers move on to their encounter with Ciaccio, from Florence. **Plutus** is yet another creature the travelers encounter as they enter the fourth circle, where they find the hoarders and spenders; the Canto begins with his half-meaningful, evocative gibberish and ends with the indecipherable "gargle" of the sullen, whose only speech are the silent bubbles that pock the surface of the slimy muck under which they're completely submerged. Virgil silences the blabbering Plutus with a powerful reminder that their journey "is no causeless trek. It is willed from above, where Michael wreaked revenge on pride's rebellion." We are treated to a vivid simile to describe the way Plutus shrivels to the ground at Virgil's words ("Just as sails swollen with wind as soon as the mast is snapped collapse and plunge"). It's a little ironic for Virgil to evoke the angel Michael (who defeated the fallen angels), because in the next canto the fallen angels are going to defeat him—also because of "pride." After Plutus, the travelers encounter **Phlegyas** at the beginning of the fifth circle. Virgil fends him off, saying only, "Phlegyas, Phlegyas, you roar in vain this time... You'll have us in your boat only as long as it takes to cross the fen." Notice Virgil invokes no higher

power here. He seems to be getting a little over-confident in his own power. And notice how Phlegyas reacts; he feels cheated, like the “butt of gross deception.” He lets them board, but he’s “bursting to complain.” When Virgil meets the terrifying **fallen angels** and the **furies** at the Gate to Dis, he is suddenly powerless. Can you guess why? Is there a reason?

IN CANTO IX, Virgil suddenly becomes unexpectedly powerless. Why?

- His overconfidence has been growing; things are growing out of balance as a result. It’s a crisis that needs to be resolved; Virgil is “put in his place.”
- A rift between Virgil and Dante has been in evidence ever since they entered Limbo. It becomes completely obvious at the beginning of Canto X, when Dante is horribly sarcastic towards Virgil and Virgil accuses Dante of being secretive, then later pushes him forcefully toward Farinata.
- You can observe the development of this rift, this strain, going all the way back to Canto III. Dante asks questions, Virgil answers. A familiar structure we see throughout the book. But at times it’s not that smooth.
 - In III, you see Dante asking a question and Virgil telling him to (in essence) shut up and look for yourself, you’ll find out when we get there. Why this brusqueness? (p. 23). After Dante observes for himself, Virgil gladly clarifies (p. 25).
 - In IV, Virgil seems a little peeved that Dante mistakes his pity for fear. Then he rebukes him for not being curious enough, not asking enough questions! Is this a contradiction of what he said earlier?
 - Virgil shows a lack of self-knowledge when he declares the only reason he’s in hell is that he was born before Christ. Actually, he’s flawed in other ways, too. He still has pity, first and foremost. And he’s prone to a big ego.
 - Virgil asks Dante in V, “what are you thinking?”-but must be a little miffed at Dante’s answer that he has so much pity for the sinners. He’s been told not to.
 - In VI, when Virgil explains the Final Judgment, how souls will be made more perfect, he upbraids Dante for not knowing his science. Sounds a little superior.
 - In VII, he’s short with Dante, calling his reasoning a “dead end” (he calls it “vain”-as in, in vain). He calls humans in general (meaning Dante first and foremost it seems, “foolish creatures” and haughtily entreats us to receive HIS teaching. His growing conceitedness is a bit of a problem that erupts in the next canto, when he finds himself powerless against the fallen angels. **
 - In VIII, Dante and Virgil are only barely civil to one another. When Dante poses his customary question, Virgil’s reply that begins “It should be clear” (p. 61) is probably intended to mean, “You are a dolt, but I’ll answer anyway.” And here is where Virgil decides he has the power to deflect Phlegyas all alone, without invoking the higher power.
 - Before he’s defeated, however, Virgil praises Dante for his proper response to Argenti. You’re finally “getting it,” Virgil seems to imply. But then terror strikes and they are faced with the fallen angels. P. 67 is a bit of black comedy, or irony. When Dante entreats Virgil to never leave him, Virgil promises not to, then immediately leaves him all alone.
 - When Virgil loses his confidence, he is still saying things like “I will conquer this crew” (hubris).
 - In the battle with the fallen angels and furies, Dante is terrified; he’s lost confidence in Virgil, though he clings to him out of terror. Virgil does protect him from the Gorgon (Medusa). When the heavenly help arrives in its awesome tornado power, Dante sees it’s not really Virgil’s power that is making it possible for them to pass. He is merely the “guide.”
 - The heavenly angel blows past and restores balance and order. They return to their customary question/answer, and notice that Virgil is not haughty anymore.
 - At the beginning of X, Dante is really sarcastic!! Virgil is equally upset. But the interaction with Farinata seems to soothe their wounds, and they travel on without bickering anymore.

**As Virgil is losing his edge, Dante is gaining one. He’s becoming stronger. By the end of Canto VII, he’s “gazing intently” at the sinners; he’s not intimidated anymore. He’s curious, and he seems to be over his tendency to swoon and faint.

Interaction with Sinners

This seems to follow a familiar pattern. There are a few exceptions, however. Notice that in Canto VIII, Virgil interacts with the sinner for the first time, speaking directly to Argenti. And Virgil for the first time praises Dante for his reaction to Argenti. This represents the first episode in which Dante expresses no pity for the suffering he sees; in fact, he says, in effect, bring it on, let me see it. I’ll enjoy this one. How does this change in Dante develop the “strife of pity” theme we’ve been observing so far?