

**THE STRUCTURE AND RHYME SCHEME OF  
THE DIVINE COMEDY**

**Dante builds a “cathedral of words.”**

- 3 = triune (Holy Trinity). Its multiples are therefore mystically significant: 9, 33, 99 ...
- 7 = Biblically significant; 7 days of Creation, et al.
- 10 = medieval perfection; 100 is an important multiple.

Apart from an introductory canto in the *Inferno*, each major section contains 33 cantos, for the total sum of a perfect hundred.

3 Cantiche of 33 cantos = 99	+ 1 introductory canto = 100 total
Hell has 9 circles (+ vestibule = 10)	3 sins
Purgatory has 9 levels (+ terrestrial paradise = 10)	3 loves
Paradise has 9 heavens (+ Emyrean = 10)	3 loves

**Verse Form:** *terza rima* of 3-line stanzas

**Rhyme Scheme:** *terza rima* [having a “third rhyme,” that is a “third rhyming word”]

**Example:** aba, bcb, cdc, ded ... xyx, yzy, z

This pattern runs continuously from the beginning to the end of every canto, each three-line stanza (*terzain*) being rhyme-linked to the one before and the one after, until the sequence is neatly tied off by a single line rhyming with the middle line of the preceding stanza. Each line is the same length – 11 syllables (hendecasyllabic).

**Example:**

<i>Then I to him: “Poet, I thee entreat,</i>	entreat	a
<i>By that great God whom thou didst never know,</i>	know	b
<i>Lead on, that I may free my wandering feet</i>	feet	a
<i>From these snares and from worse; and I will go</i>	go	b
<i>Along with thee, St Peter’s Gate to find,</i>	find	c
<i>And those whom thou portray’st as suffering so.”</i>	so	b
<i>So he moved on; and I moved on behind.</i>	behind	c

— *Inferno*, Canto I, ll. 130-136, Dorothy Sayers’ Translation

5

The Guelph party in Florence had a major party split because of a family feud in the Cancellieri family, and was divided into White and Black Guelphs. Dante was involved in the political sphere and became a prominent White Guelph. For two months in mid-1300, he held the office of priorate in Florence, which would be like being the city’s mayor. Those two months had dire, lifelong repercussions. In the year 1302, while Dante was absent from Florence, the Blacks came to power, and they accused Dante and several other prominent White Guelphs of fraud and corruption while in office. On January 27, 1302, sentence was passed: a fine of 5000 florins to be paid within three days on pain of total confiscation, exile for two years, and perpetual deprivation of office. On March 10th, a second and severer decree was proclaimed against Dante and four other prominent White Guelphs, declaring that they would be burned to death if they ever came near Florence again. Dante took refuge first in Verona, and after wandering from place to place, he settled in Ravenna. **While there, he finished writing the *Divine Comedy*, which he had begun in about 1308, if not later. He died in Ravenna in 1321.**

Dante never saw Florence again, partly because he later rejected any compromise solutions to his situation there. He seems never to have seen his wife again, although some of his children apparently joined him later in Ravenna. He repeatedly asserted his innocence regarding the charges that had been made against him, calling himself an “undeserving exile.”

**THE MAJOR SYMBOLIC IMAGES**

Go over The Major Symbolic Images with the students, given on p. 4 of the Student Guide. Students are responsible to know **what Dante, Virgil, and Beatrice symbolize in the Allegory.**

**THE STRUCTURE AND RHYME SCHEME OF THE DIVINE COMEDY**

Go over The Structure and Rhyme Scheme of the *Divine Comedy* with the students, given on p. 5 of the Student Guide. Students are responsible to know **the Rhyme Scheme and how the *Comedy* is divided into 3 Cantiche with 33 Cantos each, plus an introductory canto for a total of 100.**

**Teacher Notes**

Have the students mark the bolded material and complete the Comprehension Questions on pp. 6-7.

# Teacher Guide

## Teacher Notes

Students should mark the following Comprehension Questions, which they will be responsible for on their test (all students should clearly circle the Comprehension Question number):

### Comprehension Questions:

#1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9

The Comprehension Questions on pp. 6 and 7 of the Student Guide are not meant to be a separate lesson, but are meant to complete the Introduction and should be assigned after Introductory Lecture 2.

After the students have been given time to work through the Comprehension Questions on their own, go over them together, making sure that the students check their work to see that their answers are correct and complete. Stress the fact that the students will be using their answers to study for tests, and if they neglect to write down everything necessary, they will not have the material they need to study when test time comes.

## Discussion Help

Many students have difficulty understanding the concept of allegory. If, as they complete and discuss the Comprehension Questions, it becomes clear that they are having trouble, Dorothy Sayers offers a helpful explanation of allegory in her Introduction to the *Divine Comedy 1: Hell* on pp. 11-13 which would offer examples for instruction and class discussion.

It might also be helpful to take an extra lesson to read and discuss a shorter allegory, such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *Leaf By Niggle*, which can be found online. It is particularly relevant to Dante as it is also an allegory about Purgatory and Paradise.

Another exercise which can be helpful is to get the students to do a few writing exercises to get their brains thinking along an "allegorical line." To begin with, have the students write a simple paragraph or two in which they have to describe an object *without naming it* or using any of the most common words associated with that thing (as in the game Taboo). This helps them work at thinking about things from a different angle. If they are still struggling with the exercise, have them attempt a second descriptive paragraph. Finally, have them attempt to create their own allegory, using 1-2 pages to write a story in which symbolic figures and events convey a meaning other than the literal.

## DANTE'S PERSONAL SUMMARY

This is Dante's *own* description of his work, taken from a letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala:

"The subject of the whole work then, taken merely in the *literal* sense is 'the state of the soul after death straightforwardly affirmed,' for the development of the whole work hinges on and about that. But if, indeed, the work is taken *allegorically*, its subject is: 'Man, as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of his free choice, he becomes liable to rewarding or punishing Justice.'"

### Comprehension Questions

1. What is an allegory? An allegory is a narrative or description in which things have a figurative or symbolic meaning.
2. How is Dante's allegory different from the standard type? 1) It is true in its literal meaning.  
2) The figures of the allegory are not personified abstractions but symbolic personages.
3. What is the difference between a personified abstraction and a symbolic personage? Give an example of each. A personified abstraction is an abstract characteristic or ideal which is given human form and personality. Ex. "Tyranny" portrayed as a devil riding over other's freedom in his chariot. A symbolic image is an actual person or thing that by its own nature is qualified to symbolize an abstraction. Ex. Nero or Hitler could be used as symbols of Tyranny.
4. What is the main allegory of the *Divine Comedy*? The main allegory of the *Divine Comedy* is "the soul's search for God" or "the Way to God."
5. What two popular story types does Dante combine in this allegory? The two popular story types that Dante combines in this allegory:  
1) a vision of the afterlife - Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory  
2) the story of a Lover who has to adventure through the Underworld to find his Lost Lady
6. Who were the Guelphs and the Ghibellines? The Guelphs were a political party of native Italians who were against the empire and for the Pope. They wanted constitutional government. The Ghibellines were an aristocratic party who were for the Emperor and against the territorial power of the Pope.

## Assignments

7. What was Dante's political affiliation, and what was the outcome of this affiliation?  
Dante was a Guelph, and when the Guelph party split, Dante became a prominent White Guelph. When the Black Guelphs came to power in Florence, they accused Dante and several other prominent Whites of fraud and corruption while in office. As a result, Dante was sent into exile and he never saw Florence again.
8. What is the time frame/time of the year of the *Comedy*, and what is the probable significance of this timing? The *Comedy* takes place during Easter week in the year 1300. This time frame coincides exactly with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, so that the soul "dies to sin" and is "buried with Christ" on Good Friday evening and "rises with Christ" in the dawn of Easter.
9. What are the two kinds of symbols? Define them.  
1) a conventional symbol - a sign arbitrarily chosen to represent something else.  
2) a natural symbol - something that naturally suggests something because of its inherent characteristics.
10. In your own words, state Dante's own description of the 1) *literal* and 2) *allegorical* meaning of the *Comedy*. Dante says the literal meaning of the *Comedy* is the assertion of the state of the soul after death. Allegorically, he says it portrays how man, by the choices he makes, becomes deserving of either punishment or reward.
11. Pick two of the images from the "Major Symbolic Images" handout and explain how each fulfills the function of a natural symbol. (i.e., How can Dante easily use each in his allegory because of its natural characteristics?) Answers may vary.
12. How does Dante use numbers to build a "cathedral of words"? Dante divides the *Comedy* into 3 main sections (3 refers to God and all things holy), and each section has 33 cantos (a multiple of 3). These, combined with the addition of one introductory canto, add up to 100 cantos (a multiple of ten), which symbolizes perfection and completion.

- Have students read Cantos I & II before the next lesson.

- Remind students to review Drill Questions #1-19. They can expect to be drilled on these at any time! As a review exercise, have them fill in the answers to Questions #1-19 in the back of their Student Guides (pp. 118-119). Besides using Drill Questions as a refresher to start class, they can also be used if there is extra time at the end of class or at transition points when the students are getting out books, etc. It keeps students on task and, if used faithfully, will become information that is almost second nature!

- Optional: Have the students come up with three questions per canto as they read, to get them thinking analytically about the text. They must bring these to class to add to the discussion of the text at the appropriate time. The questions can be collected at the end of class and given a completion grade that can be put towards a participation or homework grade.

# Teacher Guide

## Drill and Background

Begin the lesson by randomly selecting students to answer Drill Questions 1-19.

**Memorization:** This would be a good opportunity to further explain the Memorization Assignment. The goal is to memorize the entirety of Canto I by the end of the course. Students are assigned one stanza per lesson, and will be quizzed every other lesson (two stanzas at a time) for a small homework grade. At the end of each major section of the *Comedy*, they will be tested on the stanzas covered up to that point for a larger, end-of-the-term memorization grade. To get them started, have them turn to Canto I and number the stanzas 1 through 43 in the margins. Then, begin by reading Stanza 1 aloud together 3-4 times to become familiar with it.

### Background/Overview:

Canto I serves as the prologue to the whole *Comedy*. As such, it is not merely an introduction to the *Inferno*, but gives a swift sketch of the design for the whole poem. As already stated, the main allegory of the poem is the soul's search for God, and here we see Dante, the main character who represents Every Christian

Sinner, finding himself lost in the Dark Wood of Sin or Error, striving to reach the mount that leads up to God (Purgatory), but ruthlessly hounded and blocked by the beasts of his sins. Just as all is almost lost ("as I fell to my soul's ruin," line 61), the character of Virgil, or Human Reason, comes to the rescue. He tells Dante that the way out is not up, but first *down*, and proposes that Dante follow him as his guide. He explains that he will lead Dante first through Hell ("the second death of souls," line 110) and then through Purgatory ("souls in fire and yet content in fire," line 112). He then signifies that another guide will take over to lead Dante into Heaven (where God "holds court, his city and his throne," line 121). They set off on the proposed journey, which Dante (the author) proceeds to describe for us, divided into its three parts, The *Inferno*, The *Purgatorio*, and The *Paradiso*.

Canto II is the beginning of The *Inferno* proper. As does each section of the *Comedy*, it begins with an appropriate invocation. Dante and Virgil are ready to descend into Hell, but Dante holds back, feeling unworthy for a vision of the afterlife which only such as Aeneas and Paul have been granted before him. To assure him, Virgil explains that he has come to rescue Dante, not on some whim, but at the request of a trio of heavenly ladies—Beatrice (Divine Love), provoked by Lucia (Divine Revelation), sent ultimately by Mary herself (Divine Grace). Who could refuse such a bidding?

## THE INFERNO – CANTOS I & II

### Canto I

#### Line

- 1.....midway - Man's typical life span, according to the Bible, is 70 yrs., so this makes Dante 35 yrs. old.
- .....our - By using the inclusive pronoun, Dante necessarily involves the reader.
- 18.....that planet - the Sun; a planet according to medieval astronomy and a symbol of divine illumination.
- 33.....Leopard - the first beast, symbolizing the sin of Lust or, more generally, all sins involving self-indulgence or incontinence.
- 38.....Aries - According to tradition, the Sun was in the zodiacal sign of Aries (Mar. 21-Apr. 21) at the moment of Creation.
- 40.....sweet season of commemoration - spring/Easter.
- 44.....Lion - the second beast, symbolizing the sin of Pride or, more generally, all the violent sins.
- 48.....She-Wolf - the third beast, symbolizing the sin of Avarice or, more generally, all the sins of malice or fraud.
- 65.....Have pity on me - The first spoken words of the poem are *Miserere di me*, taken from Psalm 51.
- 67.....(The Entrance of Virgil) (70-19 B.C.), born under Julius Caesar, symbol of Human Reason and current resident of Limbo.
- 89.....another way - At this point, the ascent can only be made by first descending. The Mountain (Way to God) cannot be directly approached from the Dark Wood, where the beasts (sin) block the way. The ascent can only be made after a man sees his sin for what it is (Hell) and repents of it (Purgatory).
- 95.....Greyhound - a much disputed image, but clearly a "savior figure," either politically establishing a just Empire or spiritually establishing God's Kingdom on earth.
- 105.....From this point to line 121, Dante has Virgil give an **outline of the journey to come**.

### Canto II

#### Line

- 7.....Invocation - In typical classic style, it addresses the Muses, Genius, and Memory.
- 13.....the father of Sylvius - Aeneas. See the *Aeneid* Book VI, where Aeneas visits Hades and is told he is to settle in Italy, which leads to the foundation of Rome, the seat of both the Empire and the Papacy.
- 28.....According to apocryphal writings, Paul had a vision of Hell. Thus **Aeneas and Paul** are two other mortals Dante can think of who also made the trip through Hell, being especially significant because they symbolize the Empire and the Church, respectively.
- 52.....a Lady - Beatrice.
- 78.....the heaven of the smallest circle - the Moon; thus "all within that circle" is earth.
- 94.....Lady in Heaven - Mary.
- 118.....the near way - Since the beasts blocked the path to the Mountain, Dante must now take the long road—through Hell.
- 121.....three such blessed Ladies - Mary, Lucia, and Beatrice.

### Vocabulary

1. rank overgrown; too apt to produce weeds; foul
2. arduous difficult, trying
3. avarice greed; an insatiable desire for wealth
4. attrition imperfect remorse for sin, based on fear of punishment rather than love of God
5. presume to take undue liberties based on arrogance, presupposition, or assumption

**Comprehension Questions**

1. What are the three beasts, and what does each symbolize? \_\_\_\_\_  
 1) the Leopard - symbolizes the sin of Lust or the self-indulgent sins  
 2) the Lion - symbolizes the sin of Pride or the violent sins  
 3) the She-Wolf - symbolizes the sin of Avarice or the sins of malice and fraud  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
2. Why must Dante go by "another way"<sup>(line 89)</sup>? Why can't he ascend the Mount directly from the Dark Wood? At this point, the ascent can only be made by first descending. The Mountain (Way to God) cannot be directly approached from the Dark Wood, where the beasts (sin) block the way. The ascent can only be made after a man sees his sin for what it is (Hell) and repents of it (Purgatory).  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
3. Why, in this obviously Christian work, does Dante invoke the Muses? As the story proceeds, Dante does invoke higher and higher aid, ultimately invoking God Himself, but in an invocation concerning Hell, to seek Christian/divine aid is hardly appropriate.  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
4. Who are the two others Dante mentions as going before him through Hell, and what is their significance? They are Aeneas and Paul, and they are significant because they are symbolic of Dante's two great concerns: the EMPIRE and the CHURCH.  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
5. What do the "three blessed Ladies" symbolize, and what is their role in Dante's journey? \_\_\_\_\_  
The three Ladies are a threefold image of Divine Grace: Mary symbolizes Divine Grace, Lucia, Divine Illumination, and Beatrice, Divine Love. Together they provoke Reason (Virgil) to go to Dante's rescue and open his eyes to his sinfulness so he can receive God's grace.  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

**Memorization Passage:** *Inferno*, Canto I, Stanza 1

**Discussion Help**

**Note:** For Comprehension Question #1, I follow Dorothy Sayers' interpretation rather than Ciardi's. Ciardi says the Leopard symbolizes malice and fraud, and the She-Wolf incontinence, but to interpret it the other way around makes more sense, as the beasts then follow the order of the sins as they are found in Hell. The She-Wolf is also referenced in the text several times in connection with avarice or fraud.

**Discussion:**

Lines 88-93 of Canto II provide a possible topic of Discussion. Beatrice says to Virgil, "your anguish does not touch me" (line 92). Does she show herself to be cruel and completely devoid of pity by this comment? Does Virgil, in his hopeless state in Limbo, not deserve her pity? Have the students discuss why or why not. (Dorothy Sayers, in her notes on Canto II, directs the reader for help on this topic to C. S. Lewis' discussion of pity in *The Great Divorce*, p. 111. Essentially, the issue is that pity, in our fallen world, can involve pain on the part of the one who feels it. If Beatrice, as a blessed soul, already enjoying the bliss of heaven, were

to experience pity in this way, would it not mar her bliss? Is it not right to expect that Heaven is a place where such pain, even on behalf of others, can no longer spoil one's own joy?)

**Teacher Notes**

Students should mark the following Vocabulary & Comprehension Questions, which they will be responsible for on their test:

**Vocabulary:** arduous, avarice

**Comprehension Questions:** # 1, 2, 5

**Assignments**

- Have students read Cantos III & IV before the next lesson.
- Quiz #1: There will be a quiz on Cantos II & III. Remind students that keeping up with reading the assigned cantos is essential, and is all that is necessary to prepare for a quiz.