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The Divine Comedy

Dante

Study Guide on Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy: Inferno*

Why does Dante the pilgrim enter into Hell? Consider the following questions:

- What is Dante's condition at the beginning of the journey?
 - "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself in a dark wilderness, / for I had wandered from the straight and true" (1.1–3¹).
 - "How I had entered, I can't bring to mind, / I was so full of sleep just at that point / when first I left the way of truth behind" (1.10–12).
- What do the three beasts signify? (the leopard – 1.32, lion – 1.45, and she-wolf – 1.49)
- What benefit will arise from this journey?
 - For instance, Virgil commands Dante along their journey, "In order that you may bring back with you / the full experience of this round," he said, / 'go and observe the habits of that crew.'" (17.37–39).
 - What other benefits are there for Dante? For the reader?

Why does Dante need a guide through Hell? (See 12.85 ff.)

- How does Dante view Virgil?
 - "You are my teacher, my authority . . ." (1.85)
 - He refers to Virgil at 10.4: "O highest peak of virtue . . ."
- What kind of knowledge does Virgil have of Hell?
 - "I know the journey well, so rest assured" (9.30).
 - What exactly does Virgil understand about Hell and its occupants?
- What seem to be the intentions of Virgil? What does he hope to help Dante to achieve?

Hell is the place for those who have lost the good of the intellect (3.18). What does this mean? In what sense is sin an intellectual loss and degeneration? Do the sinners Dante meets exhibit a loss of intelligence? If so, how?

Does Limbo make sense? How does Dante the poet portray those virtuous pagans who were ignorant of the faith? Does his placement of them in Limbo make sense?

Why would one need to descend into Hell in order to ascend to Heaven? In other words, why go down in order to go up?

Why, exactly, are Paolo and Francesca in Hell? Does the way that Francesca retells their story reveal anything about her character? Can she be trusted as a teller of her own tale?

¹ Dante. *Inferno*. Translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: Modern Library, 2002. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



Ciacco asks Dante to “remember” him when he returns home (6.88–89). What does this request tell us about Ciacco’s desires? Does it exemplify any larger theme in the *Inferno* regarding the damned?

Virgil reprimands Dante for weeping, saying, “Here pity [alt. *piety*] lives the best when it is dead.” (20.28). Does Dante the poet want us to feel pity for the damned? What would it mean to feel such pity?

Is there a “rhetoric” of *Inferno*?

- Virgil refers to God as the “Great Emperor” (1.124).
- Virgil: “No questions—only know that this is willed / where power is power to do whatever it will” (3.95–96). (This phrase is repeated at 5.23–24.)

What effect, if any, does the journey through Hell have on Dante the pilgrim?

- Dante eventually says to Virgil, “We two now share one will alone” (2.139).
- Consider where and why Dante faints (e.g., the ends of Cantos 3 and 5).
- After Dante asks to have Filippo Argenti dunked in Styx (8.52–54), Virgil declares, “Such a desire is good to satisfy” (8.57).
- “O highest Wisdom, how much art you show / in Heaven, on earth, and in the evil world! / How justly does your power apportion all!” (19.10–12).
- Dante’s “courtesy”: “To be / villainous to him was a courtesy” (33.149–150)
- See the “conversion” (lit. “a turning”) at 34.70 ff. Look for similar “conversions” throughout the poem.

Are the levels of Hell reasonably ordered? What principles has Dante the poet used in ordering the different sins and assigning the severity of their punishments?

- Incontinence (These sins offend God least—11.84)
 - Lust (Canto 5)
 - Gluttony (Canto 6)
 - Miserliness and squandering (Canto 7)
- Malice (11.78 ff.)
 - Violence: against God, self, and another
 - Fraud (peculiar to man, therefore hated by God even more) (11.25–27)
 - With trust
 - Without trust

From what you have read so far, how do you think we are supposed to read *The Divine Comedy*? Is it an allegory? Consider these passages:

- “Midway upon the journey of our life . . . ” (1.1).
- “O you whose intellects see clear and whole, / gaze on the doctrine that is hidden here / beneath the unfamiliar verses’ veil” (9.61–63).



- “Avarice, pride, and envy are the three / principal flames that set [men’s] hearts afire” (6.74–75).
- Why is the bottom of Hell cold?



Study Guide on Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy: Purgatorio*

Purgatory is the mountain “where reason winnows [alt. *searches*] us” (3.3²). What is the role of reason in the purgation of sin? Trace this theme throughout *Purgatorio*. To begin, consider the following:

- “O conscience fine and full of dignity!” (3.8)
- The ways of the Trinity are beyond reason (3.34 ff.)

Virgil continues as Dante’s guide through most of Purgatory. Consider:

- What is the significance of Virgil’s leading Dante through a region that he, Virgil, does not know?
 - Virgil misunderstands what “moves” souls in Purgatory (1.79–96).
- What, if anything, is Virgil getting out of this journey?
- What outside assistance do Virgil and Dante receive?

Why can the souls in Purgatory only make progress upward with the help of the sun (7.40 ff.)? What does the sunlight represent?

Virgil instructs Dante, “Listen to me . . . so that you may / more clearly understand the thing, and take / some beneficial fruit from our delay” (17.88–90). What account does Virgil give of the structure of Purgatory?

- How is it similar to the structure of the *Inferno*? How different?
- What does Virgil mean when he claims, “Hence you can understand how love must be / the seedbed where all virtuous deeds must grow, / with every act that warrants punishment” (17.103–105).

Why is there singing in Purgatory? (See, e.g., the *Miserere* at 5.24.)

Why does it take until the end of Canto 9 to enter Purgatory? Consider the following:

- The effect of Hell on Dante: “The dead air / which had saddened my heart and dimmed my eyes” (1.17–18).
- What is the meaning of Dante seeing the four stars (1.22–27)?
- What is the significance of the “simple, slender reed” (1.94–96)?

What matters to souls in Purgatory?

² Dante. *Purgatory*. Translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: Modern Library, 2003. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- Truth (3.117, 5.103).
- Prayers (3.145).
- How do the desires of these souls compare to those of the damned?

Consider the way in which Dante makes direct reference to his art:

- “Reader, you may well see how I exalt / the matter of my song, so never wonder / if now I prop it up with greater art” (9.70–72). Why does Dante draw attention to his art here? Does this take away from the poetry?
- “Urania, help me with your choir, to set / hardly conceivable things in poetry” (29.41–42). What does Dante mean here, allegorically?

What is happening to desire in Dante’s ascent of Mount Purgatory? Consider the following:

- The desire to know (20.146) and the natural thirst for knowledge (21.1 ff.).
- Dante’s desire to see Beatrice helps him on the journey (27.35 ff.).
- “You’d turned your will elsewhere, and your desire” (33.99).

What is the difference between the torments of Hell and those of Purgatory?

Why is Beatrice so harsh with Dante when they meet in the earthly paradise? See 30.73 ff., Beatrice on Dante’s journey (30.121), and Dante’s confession (31.1 ff.).

What do you think of the fact that Statius is saved, in part through his reading of Virgil, whereas Virgil himself apparently is not? (See 22.63 ff.)

Why is the purgation of pride at the bottom of the mountain, and lust near the top? Why is the terrace of pride adorned with stunning works of art?

“And as the noble soul makes no excuse / but forms its own will from another’s will” (33.130–31). What does this obedience have to do with Purgatory? Should Purgatory be seen as a means of perfecting this quality in souls?

- How is this quality related to freedom? Virgil tells Dante, after they have walked through the flames that purge lust, that he is now *free* (27.140–142). What does that mean?
- What kind of freedom is gained by souls going up the mountain?



Study Guide on Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy: Paradiso*

What role does wonder play in Dante the Pilgrim's journey through Paradise? Where does he experience it, and what seems to be its cause? For example, consider the following:

- "My first amazement is at peace—but still / I am amazed" (1.97³).
- "Stunned with wonder" (15.33).
- "To gaze in wonder at the greatest flame" (23.90).
- See the various references to wonder in Cantos 31–33.

What sense does it make for Heaven to have levels or degrees? Why a hierarchy? Consider what Dante is told at 3.73: "If we should feel a yearning to be higher, / such desire would strike disharmony / against His will who knows." What do you think of Dante's hierarchy of heaven?

Beatrice is Dante's guide through the heavens. How does she guide him?

- How does her own presence or person instruct Dante?
 - "The gentle lady moved me with a sign / to climb the stairs behind them; that was all, / so did her nature overmaster mine" (22.100).
 - "Open your eyes, behold how I've become, / for by the power of the things you've seen / you now may bear the glory of my smile." (23.46).
- How does Beatrice point Dante toward something higher?
 - She says to him: "Listen now, turn around— / my eyes are not the only Paradise" (18.20)
 - "She . . . began to speak with such a happy smile, / I seemed to see God's gladness in her face" (27.103).
 - Beatrice is called "She who exalts my mind to Paradise" (28.3).

Hell is the place for those who have lost the good of the intellect. In what sense is Paradise the place for those who have *found* the good of the intellect? What is the connection between intellect, will, and eternal bliss?

- "I wish to fill your intellect with light, / light so aflame with life that cannot cease, / in your eyes it will tremble like a star" (2.109).
- "The greatest gift God made for any creature . . . Was from the first the will at liberty: / all creatures made to be intelligent / were and are so endowed, and only they" (5.19 ff).

³ Dante. *Paradise*. Translated by Anthony Esolen. New York: Modern Library, 2004. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- “The Lady Grace that whispers love / into your mind has opened your lips” (24.118).

Why doesn't Beatrice take Dante all the way to God? Why is her guidance replaced, ultimately, by the intercession of St. Bernard? Consider:

- Bernard says to Dante that Beatrice “stirred me from my place to bring / your hungering to its end” (31.65).

At one point, Beatrice expresses her glad approval that Dante is able to take joy in good things other than her. “My eyes are not the only Paradise,” she tells him (18.21). Why is Beatrice glad that Dante can find Paradise apart from her eyes? What does this show us about the *function* of Dante's love for Beatrice?

How do intellect and love relate, according to the *Paradiso*? How do Dante's experiences as he draws nearer and nearer to his final destination illustrate this?

- “With clear vision, with pure love” (6.86).
- “. . . him who sees things straight, / who wills things straight, who loves” (17.104).
- “The Lady Grace that whispers love / into your mind has opened your lips” (24.118).
- “I believe in one God . . . [who] moves all Heaven with love and with desire” (24.130).

In what does the joy of Paradise consist? Does it seem that the peace of which Piccarda speaks is not one of rest, but of intense activity? Why is planetary motion an apt likeness of spiritual fulfillment? Within this image, why does one go *faster* as one ascends and approaches the splendor of God?

Does the *Paradiso* help us understand why the poem is called a comedy?

What exactly happens to Dante in the final moment, when he sees God? Why do we not hear about how Dante descended from that divine pinnacle back into this mortal life?

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

