

Dante Alighieri

(1265–1321)



Author of the *Divine Comedy: Inferno*

Dante Alighieri (dän´ tā al əg yer´ ē), whose visions of Hell have haunted readers for centuries, is widely considered one of the greatest poets of western civilization. T. S. Eliot wrote, “Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third.”

Political Chaos Dante was born into a poor but noble family in the Italian city of Florence. At the time, Italy was not a unified nation but a collection of independent city-states where internal political struggles and interstate rivalries often led to warfare. Elected to help run Florence’s government, Dante and his party were overthrown in civil warfare that led to exile from his beloved city in 1302. His experience of exile would play an important role in his writing.

Pioneering Italian In Dante’s time, most European writers wrote in Latin, the language of scholarship and the Church. Dante believed that poets should write in the vernacular, or language of the people—in his case, Italian. In 1304, he published *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, which argued for the use of the vernacular. He wrote many lyric poems in Italian, and his crowning achievement, the *Divine Comedy*, was also an Italian work.

The Love of His Life Appearing in the *Divine Comedy* is a woman named Beatrice, to whom Dante also dedicated his early love poems. Scholars believe she is based on a real-life person, Beatrice Portinari. Yet evidence suggests that Dante saw the real Beatrice only twice in his life—first when he was nine and then nine years later. Nevertheless, for Dante, Beatrice came to represent an ideal love figure, the guiding force that led him from despair.

“Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray/from the straight road and woke to find myself/alone in a dark wood. . . .”



FROM THE DIVINE COMEDY:

Inferno

Dante Alighieri
translated by John Ciardi

BACKGROUND In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante uses an organizing principle based on the number three, drawn from the Christian concept of the Holy Trinity. Documenting his imagined visit to Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, he divides the epic into three parts—*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*.

In Paradise, Dante will be guided by his beloved Beatrice. For his trip through Hell to Purgatory, however, Dante's guide is the poet Virgil, to whom Dante pays homage by calling him "my Master." Virgil takes Dante through the nine circles of Hell, organized by gravity of the sin involved. In this final canto of *Inferno*, the two reach the ninth circle, by the frozen waters of Cocytus¹, where those guilty of the worst sin, treachery, are found. They include Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, and Brutus and Cassius, two Roman senators who plotted to assassinate the Roman leader Julius Caesar. They also include the angel-turned-devil Satan, here called Lucifer, the ultimate traitor who rebelled against God.

1. **Cocytus** (kō sīt' əs) Greek: "river of wailing."

▲ Critical Viewing

How does the artist's depiction of Lucifer in this engraving compare and contrast with Dante's portrayal of him?

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Canto XXXIV

Ninth Circle: Cocytus
Round Four: Judecca
The Center

Compound Fraud
The Treacherous to Their Masters
Satan

“On march the banners of the King,”² Virgil begins as the Poets face the last depth. He is quoting a medieval hymn, and to it he adds the distortion and perversion of all that lies about him. “On march the banners of the King—of Hell.” And there before them, in an infernal parody of Godhead, they see Satan in the distance, his great wings beating like a windmill. It is their beating that is the source of the icy wind of Cocytus, the exhalation of all evil.

All about him in the ice are strewn the sinners of the last round, *Judecca*, named for Judas Iscariot.³ These are the *Treacherous to Their Masters*. They lie completely sealed in the ice, twisted and distorted into every conceivable posture. It is impossible to speak to them, and the Poets move on to observe Satan.

He is fixed into the ice at the center to which flow all the rivers of guilt; and as he beats his great wings as if to escape, their icy wind only freezes him more surely into the polluted ice. In a grotesque parody of the Trinity, he has three faces, each a different color, and in each mouth he clamps a sinner whom he rips eternally with his teeth. *Judas Iscariot* is in the central mouth: *Brutus* and *Cassius*⁴ in the mouths on either side.

Having seen all, the Poets now climb through the center, grappling hand over hand down the hairy flank of Satan himself—a last supremely symbolic action—and at last, when they have passed the center of all gravity, they emerge from Hell. A long climb from the earth’s center to the Mount of Purgatory awaits them, and they push on without rest, ascending along the sides of the river Lethe, till they emerge once more to see the stars of Heaven, just before dawn on Easter Sunday.

“On march the banners of the King of Hell,”
my Master said. “Toward us. Look straight ahead:
can you make him out at the core of the frozen shell?”
Like a whirling windmill seen afar at twilight,

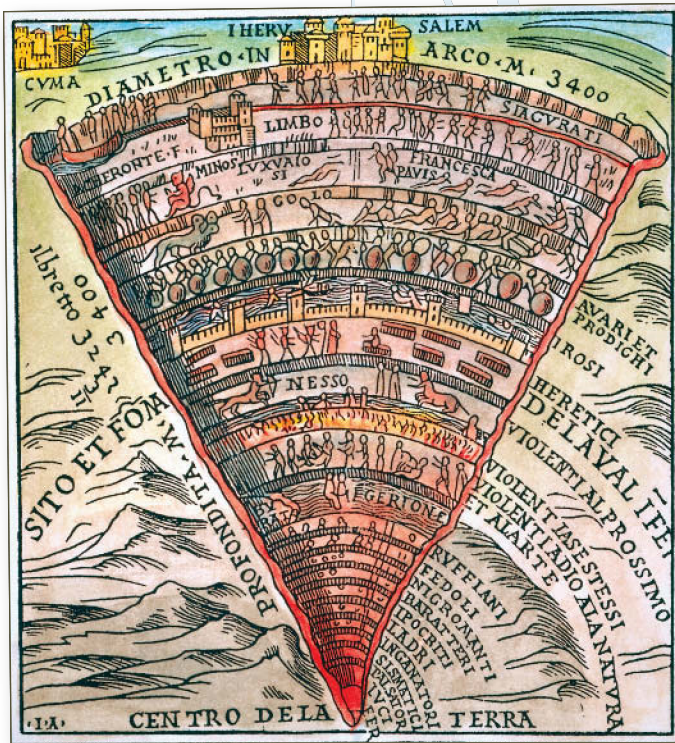
Comparing Epics

What aspect of Dante’s style is illustrated in lines 4–5?

2. On ... King This hymn was written in the sixth century by Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers. The original celebrates the Holy Cross and is part of the service for Good Friday, to be sung at the moment of uncovering the cross.

3. Judas Iscariot (is ker' ē et) disciple who betrayed Jesus; see the Bible, Matthew 26:14, 48.

4. Brutus and Cassius They took part in a plot to assassinate Julius Caesar.



◀ Critical Viewing

Where on this map of the *Inferno* do Dante and Virgil now find themselves? Use information from the background on the facing page of hints. **ANALYZE**

- 5 or when a mist has risen from the ground—
just such an engine rose upon my sight
stirring up such a wild and bitter wind
I **covered** for shelter at my Master's back,
there being no other windbreak I could find.
I stood now where the souls of the last class
10 (with fear my verses tell it) were covered wholly;
they shone below the ice like straws in glass.
Some lie stretched out; others are fixed in place
upright, some on their heads, some on their soles;
another, like a bow, bends foot to face.
15 When we had gone so far across the ice
that it pleased my Guide to show me the foul creature⁵
which once had worn the grace of Paradise,
he made me stop, and, stepping aside, he said:
“Now see the face of Dis!⁶ This is the place
20 where you must arm your soul against all dread.”
Do not ask, Reader, how my blood ran cold
and my voice choked up with fear. I cannot write it:
this is a terror that cannot be told.
I did not die, and yet I lost life's breath:
25 imagine for yourself what I became,
deprived at once of both my life and death.

Vocabulary

covered (kou' ərd) v.
crouched, as from fear
or cold

5. **the foul creature** Lucifer.

6. **Dis** (dis) in Greek mythology, the god of the lower world or the lower world itself.
Here, it stands for Lucifer.

Comparing Epics

What background information about Lucifer, or Satan, do lines 33–35 share with Milton’s epic?

Vocabulary

awe (ō) *n.* feelings of reverence, fear, and wonder

▼ Critical Viewing

Which elements in this engraving emphasize Virgil’s role as guide and protector of Dante? **ANALYZE**

The Emperor of the Universe of Pain
jutt'd his upper chest above the ice;
and I am closer in size to the great mountain
30 the Titans⁷ make around the central pit,
than they to his arms. Now, starting from this part,
imagine the whole that corresponds to it!
If he was once as beautiful as now
he is hideous, and still turned on his Maker,
35 well may he be the source of every woe!
With what a sense of **awe** I saw his head
towering above me! for it had three faces:⁸
one was in front, and it was fiery red;
the other two, as weirdly wonderful,
40 merged with it from the middle of each shoulder
to the point where all converged at the top of the skull;
the right was something between white and bile;
the left was about the color one observes
on those who live along the banks of the Nile.
45 Under each head two wings rose terribly,
their span proportioned to so gross a bird:

7. Titans giant deities who were overthrown by Zeus and the Olympian gods of Greece.

8. three faces There are many interpretations of these three faces. The common theme in all of them is that the faces are a perversion of the qualities of the Trinity.



If he was once as beautiful as now
he is hideous, and still turned on his Maker,
well may he be the **source of every woe!**

I never saw such sails upon the sea.
They were not feathers—their texture and their form
were like a bat's wings—and he beat them so
50 that three winds blew from him in one great storm:
it is these winds that freeze all Cocytus.
He wept from his six eyes, and down three chins
the tears ran mixed with bloody froth and pus.⁹
In every mouth he worked a broken sinner
55 between his rake-like teeth. Thus he kept three
in eternal pain at his eternal dinner.
For the one in front the biting seemed to play
no part at all compared to the ripping: at times
the whole skin of his back was flayed away.
60 “That soul that suffers most,” explained my Guide,
“is Judas Iscariot, he who kicks his legs
on the fiery chin and has his head inside.
Of the other two, who have their heads thrust forward,
the one who dangles down from the black face
65 is Brutus: note how he **writhes** without a word.
And there, with the huge and sinewy arms, is the soul,
of Cassius,—But the night is coming on¹⁰
and we must go, for we have seen the whole.”
Then, as he bade, I clasped his neck, and he,
70 watching for a moment when the wings
were opened wide, reached over dexterously¹¹
and seized the shaggy coat of the king demon;
then grappling matted hair and frozen crusts
from one tuft to another, clambered down.
75 When we had reached the joint where the great thigh
merges into the swelling of the haunch,
my Guide and Master, straining terribly,
turned his head to where his feet had been
and began to grip the hair as if he were climbing;¹²
80 so that I thought we moved toward Hell again.

9. **bloody froth and pus** the gore of the sinners he chews, which is mixed with his saliva.

10. **the night is coming on** It is now Saturday evening.

11. **dexterously** *adv.* skillfully.

12. **as if he were climbing** They have passed the center of gravity and so must turn around and start climbing.

Comparing Epics

What is unusual about the climate in this final circle of Dante's Hell?

Vocabulary

writhes (*rihtz*) *v.* twists and turns the body, as in agony

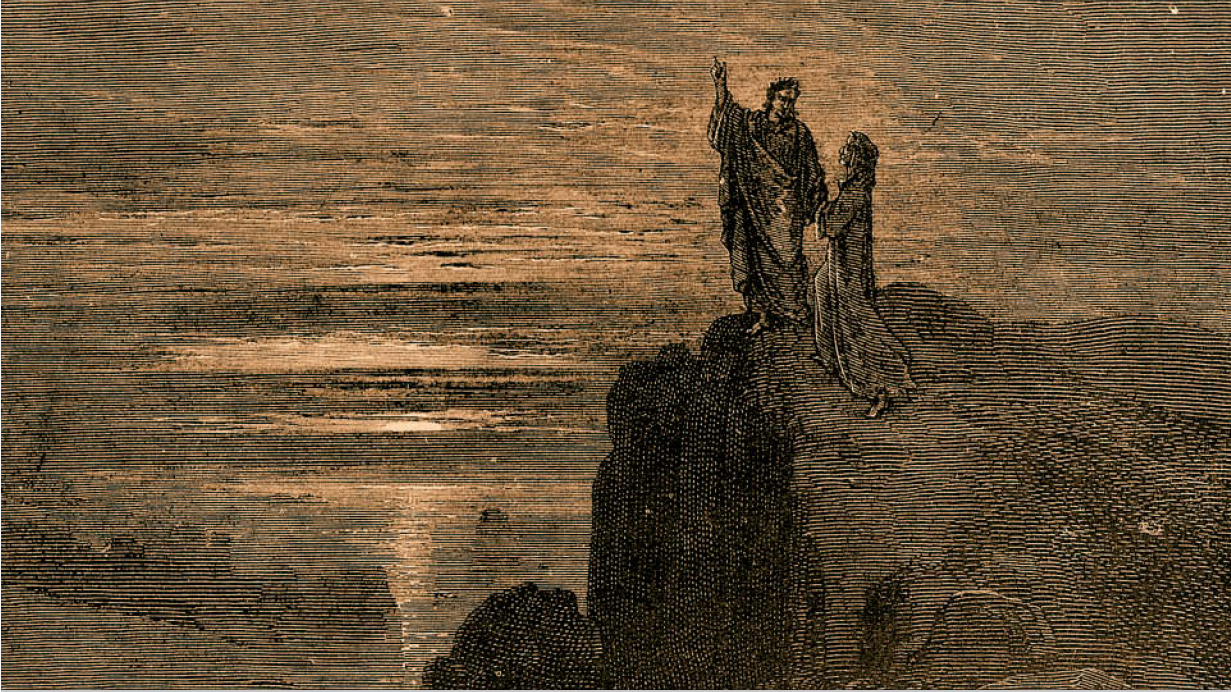
Comprehension

What torture do Judas Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius suffer?

“Hold fast!”

my Guide said, and his breath came shrill/with labor and exhaustion.

“There is no way/but by such stairs to rise above such evil.”



Vocabulary

shrill (shrĭl) *adj.* high and sharp in tone; high-pitched

Vocabulary

nimble (nim´ bəl) *adj.* able to move quickly and lightly

“Hold fast!” my Guide said, and his breath came **shrill** with labor and exhaustion. “There is no way but by such stairs to rise above such evil.”

At last he climbed out through an opening
85 in the central rock, and he seated me on the rim;
then joined me with a **nimble** backward spring.

I looked up, thinking to see Lucifer
as I had left him, and I saw instead
his legs projecting high into the air.

90 Now let all those whose dull minds are still vexed
by failure to understand what point it was
I had passed through, judge if I was perplexed.

“Get up. Up on your feet,” my Master said.

“The sun already mounts to middle tierce,¹³
95 and a long road and hard climbing lie ahead.”

It was no hall of state we had found there,

13. middle tierce According to the church’s division of the day for prayer, tierce is the period from about six to nine A.M. Middle tierce, therefore, is seven-thirty. In going through the center point, Dante and Virgil have gone from night to day. They have moved ahead twelve hours.

but a natural animal pit hollowed from rock
 with a broken floor and a close and sunless air.
 “Before I tear myself from the Abyss,”
 100 I said when I had risen, “O my Master,
 explain to me my error in all this:
 where is the ice? and Lucifer—how has he
 been turned from top to bottom: and how can the sun
 have gone from night to day so suddenly?”
 105 And he to me: “You imagine you are still
 on the other side of the center where I grasped
 the shaggy flank of the Great Worm of Evil
 which bores through the world—you were while I climbed down,
 but when I turned myself about, you passed
 110 the point to which all gravities are drawn.
 You are under the other hemisphere where you stand;
 the sky above us is the half opposed
 to that which canopies the great dry land.
 Under the midpoint of that other sky
 115 the Man¹⁴ who was born sinless and who lived
 beyond all blemish, came to suffer and die.
 You have your feet upon a little sphere
 which forms the other face of the Judecca.
 There it is evening when it is morning here.
 120 And this gross Fiend and Image of all Evil
 who made a stairway for us with his hide
 is pinched and prisoned in the ice-pack still.
 On this side he plunged down from heaven’s height,
 and the land that spread here once hid in the sea
 125 and fled North to our hemisphere for fright:¹⁵
 And it may be that moved by that same fear,
 the one peak¹⁶ that still rises on this side
 fled upward leaving this great cavern¹⁷ here.”
 Down there, beginning at the further bound

-
- 14. the Man** Jesus, who suffered and died in Jerusalem, which was thought to be the middle of the Earth.
15. fled North . . . for fright Dante believed that the Northern Hemisphere was mostly land and the Southern Hemisphere, mostly water. Here, he explains the reason for this state of affairs.
16. the one peak the Mount of Purgatory.
17. this great cavern the natural animal pit of line 97. It is also “Beelzebub’s dim tomb,” line 130.

◀ Critical Viewing

What evidence is there from this image that Dante and Virgil have made it out of hell? **ANALYZE**

Comparing Epics

Would the description of Lucifer in line 107 apply to the Satan of Milton’s epic? Why or why not?

Comprehension

What “stairway” did Virgil take to climb out of Hell?

And this gross Fiend and Image of all Evil
 who made a stairway for us with his hide
 is pinched and prisoned in the ice-pack still.

where a round opening brought in sight the blest
and beauteous shining of the Heavenly cars.
And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.

130 of Beelzebub's¹⁸ dim tomb, there is a space
not known by sight, but only by the sound
of a little stream¹⁹ descending through the hollow
it has eroded from the massive stone
in its endlessly entwining lazy flow.”
135 My Guide and I crossed over and began
to mount that little known and lightless road
to ascend into the shining world again.
He first, I second, without thought of rest
we climbed the dark until we reached the point
140 where a round opening brought in sight the blest
and beauteous shining of the Heavenly cars.
And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.²⁰

18. Beelzebub's (bē el' zə bubz') Beelzebub, which in Hebrew means “god of flies,” was another name for Lucifer or Satan.

19. a little stream Lethe (lē' thē); in classical mythology, the river of forgetfulness, from which souls drank before being born. In Dante's symbolism, it flows down from Purgatory, where it has washed away the memory of sin from the souls who are undergoing purification. That memory it delivers to Hell, which draws all sin to itself.

20. Stars As part of his total symbolism, Dante ends each of the three divisions of the *Divine Comedy* with this word. Every conclusion of the upward soul is toward the stars, symbols of hope and virtue. It is just before dawn of Easter Sunday that the Poets emerge—a further symbolism.

Cite textual
evidence to
support your
responses.

Critical Reading



- 1. Key Ideas and Details (a)** In lines 22–23, what does Dante say he cannot describe? **(b) Analyze:** How does he nevertheless communicate his experience?
- 2. Key Ideas and Details (a)** What do the three figures in Lucifer's mouth all have in common, and what do they have in common with Lucifer? **(b) Interpret:** Why do you think Dante situates these sinners in frozen waters? **(c) Infer:** Why do you think he feels no sympathy for these sinners, as he did for many sinners in earlier circles of Hell?
- 3. Key Ideas and Details (a)** Which aspect of Brutus's torture does Virgil emphasize in line 65? **(b) Interpret:** Why might language be denied to the inhabitants of the ninth circle of Hell?



Close Reading Activities

from *Paradise Lost* •
from the *Divine Comedy: Inferno*

Comparing Epics

- 1. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** Compare and contrast the ways in which Dante and Milton portray Satan (or Lucifer) in their epics. (a) What is similar about these epic villains? (b) How do they differ physically and in terms of personality?
- 2. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** (a) What is similar and different about the sinful behavior being criticized in each epic? (b) Based on the two excerpts, do you think these epics are teaching the same values? Why or why not?
- 3. Craft and Structure** How effective is each selection in achieving the elevated style appropriate to an epic? Cite specific passages to support your opinions.
- 4. Integration of Knowledge and Ideas** Is there evidence in the texts themselves that Dante's epic was written in the Middle Ages and Milton's in the seventeenth century? Explain.



Writing

2. Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

10. Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.



Timed Writing

Informative Text: Essay

Epics traditionally show their heroes braving the underworld or other dangerous, often supernatural settings to perform great deeds.

Assignment: Write an essay in which you compare and contrast the impact of the authors' choices as to how to portray setting. **[40 minutes]**

Address questions such as these to focus your analysis:

- What do the imagery and descriptive language these authors use to portray Hell have in common? How do they differ?
- What is the effect of Dante's firsthand impression of Hell compared to the effect of Milton's all-knowing narrator?
- Which setting do you find more unusual? Why?
- Which universal themes do these settings suggest? Explain.

As you draft your essay, remember to do the following:

- Write an essay of sufficient length to address the questions you decide to consider.
- Include relevant and substantial evidence and well-chosen details.
- Write legibly and use appropriate capitalization and punctuation conventions.

5-Minute Planner

Complete these steps before you begin to write:

1. Read the assignment carefully. Identify key words and phrases.
2. Weigh the similarities and differences between the two selections.
TIP As you scan the texts, jot down details that you might use.
3. Create a rough outline for your essay.
4. Reread the prompts, and draft your essay.

USE ACADEMIC VOCABULARY

As you write, use academic language, including the following words or their related forms:

categorize
classify
determine
indicate

For more information about academic language, see the vocabulary charts in the introduction to this book.