

Dante's *Divine Comedy*

A Teacher's Guide for Socratic Discussion
by Missy Andrews



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INTRODUCTION



The teacher guide series is intended to assist the teacher or parent in conducting meaningful discussions of literature in the classroom or home school. It is important to note that they are **not** intended to be workbooks for the student, but rather models and guides for discussion leaders. Questions and answers follow the pattern presented in *Teaching the Classics*, CenterForLit’s flagship literature seminar. Though the concepts underlying this approach to literary analysis are explained in detail in that seminar, the following brief summary presents the basic principles upon which this guide is based.

The *Teaching the Classics* approach to literary analysis and interpretation is built around **three unique ideas** which, when combined, produce a powerful instrument for understanding and teaching literature:

First: All works of fiction share the same basic elements — **Context, Structure, and Style**. A literature lesson that helps the student identify these elements in a story prepares him for meaningful discussion of the story’s themes.

Context encompasses all of the details of time and place surrounding the writing of a story, including the personal life of the author as well as historical events that shaped the author’s world.

Structure includes the essential building blocks that make up a story, and that all stories have in common: Conflict, Plot (which includes *exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion*), Setting, Characters, and Theme.

Style refers to the literary devices used by authors to create the mood and atmosphere of their stories. Recognition of some basic literary devices (alliteration, simile, personification, metaphor, etc.) enables a reader not only to understand the author’s themes more readily, but also to appreciate his craftsmanship more fully.

Second: Because it is approachable and engaging, *children’s literature* is the best genre to employ in teaching the foundational principles of literary analysis. Children’s books present these building blocks in clear, memorable language, and are thus treasure mines of opportunities for the astute teacher — allowing him to present Context, Structure, and Style with ease to children and adults alike. Having learned to recognize these basic elements in the simple text of a classic children’s story, a student is well prepared to analyze complex works suitable for his own age and level of intellectual development.

Third: The best classroom technique for teaching literary analysis and interpretation is the *Socratic Method*. Named after the ancient gadfly who first popularized this style of teaching, the Socratic method employs the art of questioning, rather than lecturing, to accomplish education. Based upon the conviction that the process of discovery constitutes the better part of learning, our program uses well-placed questions to teach students how to think, rather than dictating to them what to think.

The *Teaching the Classics* seminar syllabus supplies a thorough list of Socratic questions for teachers to use in class discussion. The questions are general enough to be used with any book, but focused enough to lead the

student into meaningful contemplation of the themes of even the most difficult stories. Questions on the list are arranged in order of difficulty: from grammar-level questions which ask for the mere fact of a story, to rhetoric-level questions which require discussion of ideologies and transcendent themes. Properly employed, this list can help teachers engage their classes in important discussions of ideas, and can also provide a rich resource for essays and other writing assignments! Used in conjunction with a good writing program, *Teaching the Classics* produces **deep thinkers** at any age.

The questions used in this guide have been taken directly from the Socratic list, and will therefore be familiar to the seminar alumnus.

More information about *Teaching the Classics* may be found at www.centerforlit.com/teaching-the-classics.

Happy reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Adam Andrews", with a long, sweeping underline.

Adam Andrews, Director
The Center for Literary Education
3350 Beck Road
Rice, WA 99167
(509) 738-6837
adam@centerforlit.com

QUICK CARD



Reference	<p><i>The Divine Comedy</i>. Dante Alighieri (c. 1308-1321) ISBN-13: 978-0140440065 9780140440461 978-0140441055</p> <p>Several good translations exist. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's version effectively brought the work into the Western canon of literature. Before Longfellow's English translation, the <i>Divine Comedy</i> received little serious attention from academics, as it was originally written in Italian, rather than Latin, which was the standard for scholarship and art at the time. Longfellow's translation is lovely; however, many good translators have improved upon his work. Of them, Dorothy Sayers's translation invites Dante neophytes with its clear explanations of the work's more opaque, historical allusions. In addition, Sayers retained the meter of the original work, which is no small feat considering that Dante worked in Italian, which, unlike English, provides easy end rhymes. For a worthy prose option, consider Robert M. Durling's 1997 translation, which provides extensive explanatory notes following each canto. Several of these translations are sourced in footnotes in this resource.</p>
Plot	<p>This allegorical epic depicts human life as a defining spiritual quest. In the middle of a midlife crisis, the protagonist Dante finds his path barred by ferocious beasts, allegorical representations of his own besetting sins. Unable to continue his climb up the mountain toward Paradise, he is approached by the character Virgil, who, sent by Dante's deceased and sainted patroness, Beatrice, guides the poet on a tour of Hell in hopes that his experience there will reform him. In Book One of the <i>Comedy</i>, <i>Inferno</i>, Dante relates his descent through concentric circles of hell, describing the occupants who lodge there, their diverse crimes and mete punishments. Resurfacing on Easter morning, Dante and Virgil continue their excursion up Mount Purgatory in Book Two, <i>Purgatorio</i>. There Dante encounters saints enduring purgatives to become fit for Paradise. At the top of this mountain, where the Garden of Eden lies, the poet meets Beatrice herself and, with her aid, comes to a degree of self-knowledge and repentance. In Book Three, <i>Paradiso</i>, Beatrice assumes the role of guide. Dante meets the inhabitants of the heavenlies, learning of their hierarchical degrees of blessedness, yet finding among them a ubiquitous contentment. Dante's vision ends in the throne room of the heavenly King. Dante gains from his tri-fold vision a new understanding of sin and self; he has become a new man, who has learned to love the right things the right way. Dante's supernatural journey meets with success as St. Bernard pronounces him equipped to continue his own spiritual quest; his romantic love for Beatrice has effectively ennobled his soul and directed his affections toward God.</p>

Setting	Book One, <i>Inferno</i> , is set in Hell. Book Two, <i>Purgatorio</i> , is set in Purgatory. Book Three, <i>Paradiso</i> , is set in the celestial spheres.
Characters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dante – the persona of the author himself and the protagonist of this epic. It is useful to consider Dante’s fictional <i>persona</i> (the protagonist) and the author as separate characters. • Beatrice – Dante’s patron saint and deceased love, the image of beatific beauty and female perfection. • Virgil – the shade of the Roman poet who wrote the <i>Aeneid</i>. He guides Dante through the Inferno and up to the top of Mount Purgatory, but is kept from going further into Paradise because he died unbaptized. None of the virtuous pagans featured in the <i>Comedy</i> are granted entrance to Heaven. Like Virgil, although they may observe the activities of Purgatory, they cannot ascend beyond its borders. • Various inhabitants of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, too numerous to list, including ancient writers, mythical characters, and Dante’s contemporaries from 14th century Europe. These characters inform Dante’s understanding of sin, self, salvation, and sanctification. Sayers’ (as well as Durling’s) translation and notes make even the most archaic references intelligible to modern readers. • The Triune God of the Bible
Conflict	Man vs. Self Man vs. Man Man vs. God
Themes	Sin and Blessedness The Love and Grace of God The Theology of Romantic Love The Reasonableness of Obedience to God
Literary Devices	Dante’s original work was an epic poem written in a <i>terza rima</i> rhyme scheme (ABA BCB DCD...). Depending upon the translation you read, this meter and various other poetic devices (such as end rhymes or blank verse) may be present. The nature of Italian (and most inflected languages) makes for easy end rhymes. Such rhymes are much harder to produce in English. Be aware that, as a result, many translators have chosen to render this epic in prose form. Even in prose translations, however, the <i>Comedy</i> is replete with poetic literary devices. This is the perfect opportunity to teach allegory and symbolism . Watch for allusions to literary, biblical, historical, and political ideas and personalities. Dante’s vivid imagination lives through his use of imagery and sensory language. Look, too, for common epic devices, in particular epic similes, epic catalogues, a trip to the underworld, gods and demi-gods, epic scope, an <i>in medias res</i> exposition, and multitudinous allusions to classical mythology.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: SETTING



*This section includes a detailed summary of where Dante's epic takes place, as well as a shorter discussion of when it takes place. In the "where" section, **places** and types of **people** are in bold; in the "when" section, **days**, **dates**, and **time periods** are in bold.*

1. Where does this story happen?

The Divine Comedy is a story in three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* (Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise). These locales form the setting for Dante's journey to God. Since the author's imaginative conception of these places is largely characterized by the persons who inhabit them, a discussion of the *Comedy's* setting overlaps with a discussion of character. While this creates an apparent conflation of story elements in a teacher guide, it also serves as an immediate example of the interdependence of story elements in fiction. Likewise, this interrelatedness suggests that a discussion of theme is possible from the story's outset.

The settings in the *Divine Comedy* reference many places from Classical antiquity. Dante draws from Greek and Roman mythology and philosophy to create his universe. Likewise, he includes geographical features of his homeland, Italy, as well as historical figures from both his own time and the ancient world. These combine to create a sense of historical place and time in the story. Any good translation will offer student notes and footnotes to aid in identifying these elements.

Part I: *Inferno*

Summary: In Book One of the epic, the reader discovers a story frame (Cantos I-II): In his middle age, the *persona* Dante finds that he is lost in a **dark wood**. He wants to climb the **mountain to God**, but his path is barred by three beasts, allegorical representatives of his personal besetting sins. The allegorical nature of the work is, in fact, immediately apparent. It continues as Virgil (another imaginative *persona*, this time of the author of the Roman epic, the *Aeneid*) appears to the *persona* Dante and suggests that he come on a journey of discovery with him through **the inner realms of Hell**. After learning that Virgil was sent by Beatrice, the love of Dante's life, Dante agrees to accompany Virgil. Having spent the majority of the day, Good Friday, trying to fight his way up the mountain by the path, Dante turns with Virgil to trod paths unknown to the living through the realm of shades. They descend into hell, wherein the rest of *Inferno* unfolds. Dante's journey through the Inferno follows the route of Christ on the historic first Good Friday evening after His death by crucifixion, when He descended into hell, harrowing its labyrinthine cells to lead the captives free. Dante finally ascends from the ninth circle of hell, emerging at the foot of Mount Purgatory on Easter morning. He is, symbolically speaking, a resurrected man. By alluding to these events in the Christian calendar, Dante places his entire narrative in their context, foreshadowing the salvation of the individual by allusion to Jesus Christ, who through this history became the "firstborn of many brethren" (Rom. 8:29).

Dante imagines Hell arranged in concentric circles, each descending conically toward its innermost precinct, which houses Satan (Canto XXXIV). Think of a snow cone with rings of decreasing size narrowing to a single point. The author gives his most descriptive explanation of this arrangement in canto eleven, with Virgil's explanation to Dante of the seventh circle of hell and those that follow it. Hell is the place where God's judgment of sin is most fully expressed. It is populated by those shades "who have lost the good of intellect" (Inferno III.18).¹ When Dante enters its gates, he reads the posted notice: "ABANDON EVERY HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER." (Inferno III.9).² Hopeless and dark, the shades in Hell have come to know their sins, yet they can no longer repent of them. Instead, they suffer penalties uniquely appropriate for their crimes. Justice in Dante's imagined Inferno is retributive; the scholarly phrase for this is *contrapasso*, meaning "to suffer the opposite."

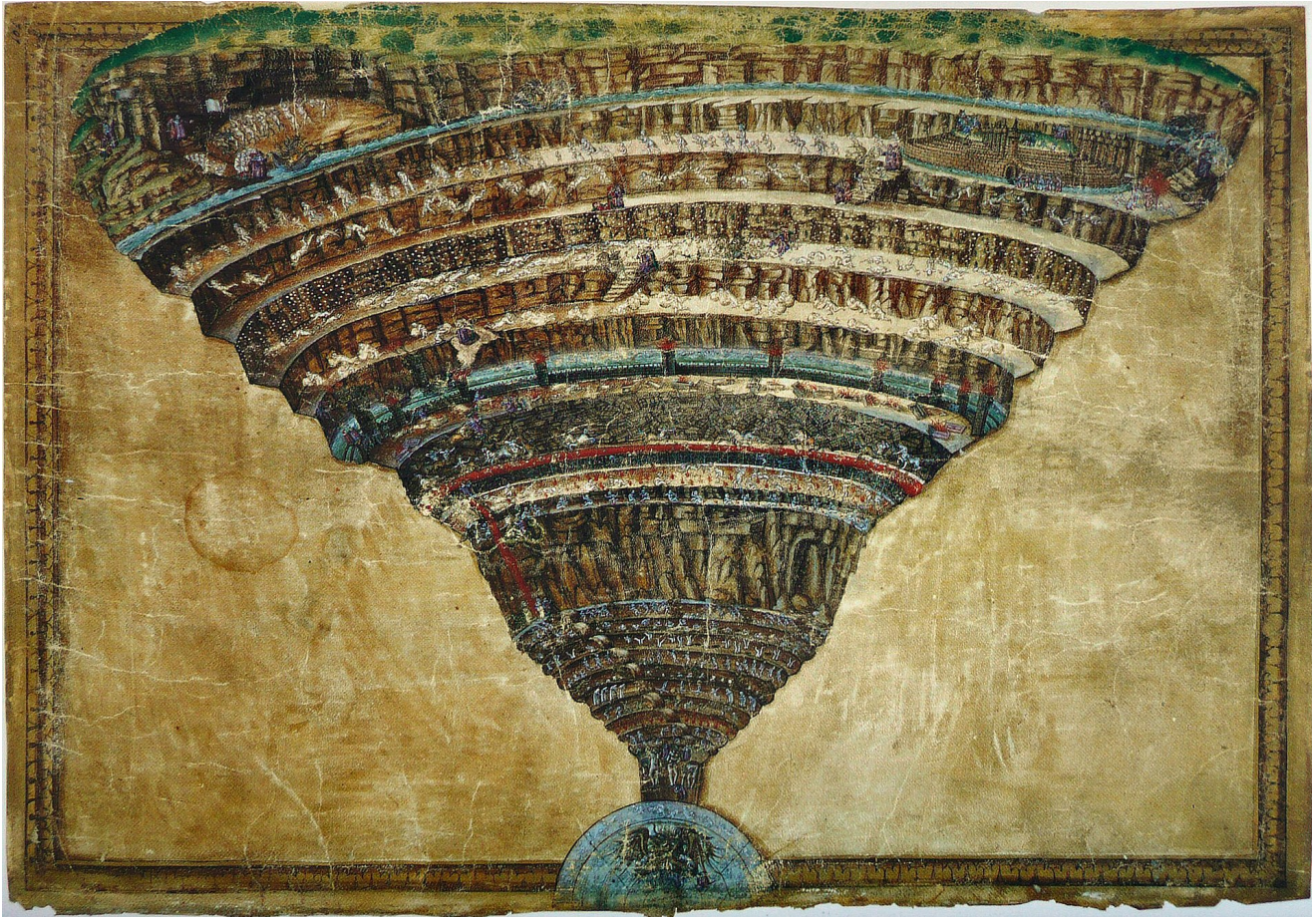


Illustration by Sandro Botticelli

Circle-by-Circle Settings:

Circle 1: The outer regions or **first circle of Hell** (Canto IV) are populated by the virtuous heathens, pagan poets, and philosophers who used the light of reason to achieve human goodness. Church tradition calls this place **Limbo**. Having died apart from Christ, they cannot enter heaven; yet their reason keeps them in its outer precincts in a dim light. They dwell in a Noble Castle, philosophy, which has seven gates, alluding to the Trivium and Quadrivium.

1. Sayers, *Hell*, 85.

2. Singleton, *Inferno*, 3.

Circle 2: The **second circle of Hell** (Canto V) holds Minos, who judges and assigns the punishment of each shade that enters the place. This circle houses **carnal sinners – for example, the lustful**. As they were blown about by their passions in life, so they are blown about by a hot windstorm for eternity in Hell.

Circle 3: The **third circle of Hell** (Canto VI) holds the **gluttons**. Lying in vomitous filth, they endure a cold, putrid rain of acid and garbage as Cerberus flays them.

Circle 4: **Circle four** (Canto VII) contains the **hoarders and squanderers**, who push weights back and forth, calling, “Why chuck away? Why grab so tight?” (Inferno VII.30).³ These are the avaricious.

Circle 5: **Circle five** (Canto VIII-IX) houses the **wrathful**. In this circle, Dante finally comes to see sin as a truly hateful thing, worthy of punishment. These angry shades are consigned to flounder in the River Styx, where they tear and beat one another. The sullen lie under mire because they didn’t relish the sweet air of earth. The wrathful reject pity for cruelty and, likewise, receive no pity from Dante, who for the first time since his arrival to Hell begins to agree with the retributive justice he witnesses. **The city Dis** rises up from the River Styx. Gorgons harass Dante and Virgil as they await admittance to the city. A heavenly angel appears to escort Dante and Virgil into the city through gates which hang from their hinges in disrepair, a reminder of a previous forced entry in Christ’s harrowing of Hell.

Circle 6: Dante and Virgil enter hell’s **sixth circle** (Canto IX-X). There they discover a plain full of burning sarcophagi. These are the **heretics**.

Circle 7: The **seventh circle** (Canto XI-XVII) contains the **violent** and the **proud**. They are arranged in three rings which correspond to the three persons to whom violence can be done: one’s neighbor (murder), oneself (suicide), and God (blasphemy). Usurers, too, make it into circle three because they subvert the divinely created nature of things, getting money without labor. A river of boiling blood houses the murderers. The suicides are, interestingly, encased in trees which have lightly rooted in the gully. Although they’ll stand at the last day for judgment, they won’t be allowed to regain their bodies. The shade of each suicide is hung on his noxious plant. A burning sand and raining fire afflict the blasphemous of the third circle of the violent — these are the proud.

Circle 8: **Circle eight** (Canto XVIII-XXX) contains the evil pouches, or *Malebowges*. The first pouch houses the **fraudulent**, who bore false witness to their lovers. They are encased in excrement. **Seducers and Panderers** (Pimps and Prostitutes) are in the second. The third pouch contains **those guilty of simony**, the buying and selling of church offices or those things conferred only by the Holy Spirit. These shades are “mashed down and flattened through the fissures of the rock... feet burned inverted for punishment.” (Inferno XIX)⁴ The fourth pouch contains the **sorcerers**, who progress backwards, seeing only what is behind, rather than before them. Because in life they “tried to see too far ahead...,” in death, they “now look backward and go retrograde.” (Inferno XX.38-39)⁵ The fifth *Malebowge* (Cantos XXI-XXII) contains boiling pitch. Into this, demons submerge the shades of **dirty politicians and lawyers**, who prefer the discomfort of the mire to the torments of their jailors. The sixth pouch (Canto XXIII) contains painted people who go round with slow steps in heavy, cowed mantles lined with lead. These are the **hypocrites**. Pouch seven (Cantos XXIV-XXV) contains thieves who are perpetually stung by serpents. As they run, they shift their shape, unable to

3. Sayers, *Hell*, 111.

4. Singleton, *Inferno*, 24.

5. Sayers, *Hell*, 196.

maintain their form. Since they failed to respect the “I/Thou” relationship (mine and yours) in their lifetimes, they have lost the right to their own personhood in the judgment. Pouch eight of *Malebowges* (Cantos XXVI-XXVII) holds the **evil counselors**, who appear as flames. The shades of the dead are housed within these fires. Here, Dante discovers the shades of the Greek soldiers Odysseus and Diomedes, as well as churchmen who sell indulgences. The ninth pouch (Canto XXVIII) houses **sowers of division and strife**. They are full of blood and wounds. Translator Dorothy Sayers translates it this way: “All those whom thou beholdest in the pit were sowers of scandal, sowers of schism abroad while they yet lived; therefore they now go split” (Inferno xxviii. 34-36). Because they divided others, they are themselves physically “divided,” cut down the body. The tenth and last pocket (Canto XXIX) holds the “falsifiers,” whom Dante discovers consigned to a sickness which renders them so weak that they are unable to stand. Here also lie the **alchemists**, who sought to counterfeit gold. With them are those who made false accusations against their neighbors (**perjurers**), all **those who debased coins**, and **those who lied for personal gain**. Alike, they burn with thirst even as they suffer water retention (a medical ailment termed dropsy). Dante is being ironic here: Those who “dropsied” (slang in Dante’s day for bribed) get dropsy.

Circle 9: In **circle nine** (Cantos XXXI-XXXIII), Dante and Virgil encounter the **giants**: Nimrod, Antaeus, etc. These **shades who misused force** are bound, arms tied, legs in a ditch. They stand around a well that opens into the deepest circle of Hell. The giant Antaeus sets Dante and Virgil down in the bottom of the well to go on to Cocytus.

Circle 10: The **tenth circle** (Cantos XXXII-XXXIV) of Hell contains **Cocytus**, a frozen lake. In it, souls are frozen with just their heads above the ice. The outer rim of the lake (called **Caina** after Cain, the murderous son of Adam and Eve) contains the **betrayers of men**. The second ring of the lake, **Antenora**, encrusts **political traitors** (Canto XXXII). These brutally gnaw upon one another. The third ring of the frozen lake holds **those who murdered their guests and friends**. In the geometric center of Lake Cocytus is three-faced Satan, the anti-Christ, encased in ice to his torso. Here Dante places the worst of the betrayers—the betrayer of Christ, Judas Iscariot, and the betrayers of Julius Caesar, Brutus and Cassius—in Satan’s mouths (Canto XXXIV).

The travelers exit Hell by climbing down the legs of Satan, at which point Hell inverts, and they suddenly discover themselves climbing upward. They emerge at the foot of Mount Purgatory on Easter Sunday, the day of resurrection.

Part II: *Purgatorio*

Summary: Emerging from Inferno on Easter Sunday, Dante and Virgil begin to climb **Mount Purgatory** toward Heaven. Structurally similar to Inferno, Purgatory is composed of **seven concentric circles, called terraces or cornices**. These decrease in diameter as the travelers climb. Just as Hell reveals the consequences of misdirected or disordered love, Purgatory portrays the refining of proper loves. Whereas the goal of the Inferno was retributive justice for sinners, the goal of Purgatory is each individual shade’s liberation from sin’s slavery. Therefore, each cornice of Purgatory correlates to a verse from the Beatitudes in the gospel of Matthew. Dante conceives of Purgatory as the mountain which makes straight what the world made crooked. The shade of the Roman Senator Cato, now the custodian of Purgatory, greets Dante and Virgil at the beginning of their climb and directs them to an easy path of ascent.

An angelic boat at the foot of the mount carries souls to the mountain. Whereas Reason was the word in Hell, Faith is the word in Purgatory. **Initially, the climb is difficult, but the way goes easier as the path inclines.** Throughout Dante’s time on Mount Purgatory, he witnesses the shades universally

begging for prayers to decrease their time of suffering. A serpent threatens the valley, but two angels with flaming swords guard it, allegorically recalling the angels posted before the Garden of Eden after the Fall. Once Dante arrives at the proper gates of Mount Purgatory, St. Peter, the keeper of the keys of the kingdom, admits them. **St. Peter's assistant marks Dante's head with seven Ps, signifying the *peccatum*, or seven deadly sins, that will be washed from Dante on the seven terraces of Purgatory: pride, envy, anger, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lust, consecutively.** Dorothy Sayers suggests that the first of the three cornices are “devoted to the purging of Love Perverted (love, that is, directed to a false object), and the four Upper Cornices to the purging of Love which, though directed to an object legitimate in itself, errs either by Defect (Cornice 4) or by Excess (Cornices 5-7).”⁶ The steps of Purgatory are decorated with biblical scenes, including the ascension of Christ, the entry of the ark of the covenant into David's Jerusalem, and more. Each terrace holds penitents who submit to a **five-step process of purgation: penance, meditation, prayer, benediction, and the erasure of guilt.** Dante experiences a foretaste of each of these as he progresses up the cornices toward the top of the mountain.



Boticelli's vision of Purgatory

Terrace-by-Terrace Settings:

Terrace 1: On the **first terrace** (Cantos XI-XIV), Dante encounters the **penitent proud**. They pray the Lord's Prayer and walk doubled over with their faces to the ground, carrying burdens on their backs heavier than they can bear until the prayers of the living assist them to heaven. As they walk, they climb stairs engraved with scenes from history depicting instances in which some proud soul

6. Sayers, *Purgatory*, 6.

has fallen. The Angel of Humility, who guards them, greets Dante and Virgil and erases the first P from Dante's forehead.

Terrace 2: On the **second terrace** (Cantos XIII-XV), the shades wear hair shirts and go blind, their eyelids sutured together with wire. In life these were **the envious**, rejoicing more at others' hurt than at their own good fortune. Because they could not stand to see the joy of others in life, for penance they are denied the joy of light. The Angel of Generosity, who governs these sad souls, erases the second P from Dante's forehead and ushers him through the Pass of Pardon to the third cornice.

Terrace 3: On **terrace three** (Canto XXVI), Dante and Virgil meet penitents singing the Agnus Dei, invoking God's mercy and meditating on Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful." These **penitent angry** dwell in a cloud of black smoke that obscures all sight. In conversation with these shades, Dante discusses free will and predestination and learns to regard sin as a decision, rather than a nature. The Angel of Peace arrives to erase the third P from Dante's forehead and admit him to the fourth cornice.

Terrace 4: On the **fourth terrace** (Canto XVII) are the shades of the **slothful**, those who have luke-warm love of the good that brings rest to the mind. Now, they race to love "that zeal in doing well may renew grace." Their "keen fervor now perhaps makes good the negligence and delay."⁷ *This canto makes a good close reading assignment as it explains Dante's whole concept of Purgatory.* Dante leaves this cornice when the Angel of Zeal admits him to the fifth cornice.

Terrace 5: The **fifth terrace** (Cantos XIX-XXI) houses occupants singing, "Blessed are those who mourn," and, "My soul cleaves to the dust."⁸ Here, the **avaricious**, who in life fixed their eyes on earthly things, lie prone, face in the dust, for the time specified by justice. By day, they praise those who employed free will wisely to forsake avarice, and by night hurl invective at those who chose wrongly. Every time a shade finds his will and is able to choose rightly, the mountain quakes. The Angel of Liberality erases the fifth P from Dante's forehead and guides him to the sixth cornice.

Terrace 6: The **sixth terrace** (Cantos XXII-XXIV) contains those who in life were overcome with **gluttony**. They sing, "Those whose desire is for righteousness are blessed"⁹ and "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall proclaim your praise."¹⁰ Their penance is starvation. The Angel of Temperance ushers Dante on his way after erasing the P of gluttony from his forehead and proclaiming the benediction: "Blessed are they whom so great grace illumines...that in their bosom's core the palate's lust kindles no craving fumes, and righteousness is all they hunger for."¹¹

Terrace 7: On the **seventh terrace** (Cantos XXV-XXVII), that of the penitent **lustful**, the shades pray for clemency. These are purged with fire. They sing, "Blessed are the pure in heart."¹² Once through the fires, they shall complete the verse, and it will be for them a reality: They shall see God. After Dante too has passed through the fire, the Angel of Chastity releases him from the seventh cornice, erasing the seventh P from his forehead and admitting him to the Pass of Penance. Having come through the seven cornices, Dante is crowned the lord of himself, ostensibly having gained self-control through the trials.

At the top of Dante's Mount Purgatory lies the Garden of Eden (Cantos XXVIII-XXXIII). Here,

7. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 68.

8. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 69.

9. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 69.

10. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 74.

11. Sayers, *Purgatory*, 258.

12. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 79.

Virgil is forced to return to the shadowy precincts of Limbo, and **Beatrice**, Dante's patron, will take over as guide. Dante crosses the **Sacred Wood**, this forest brighter than the Dark Wood in which he had become lost at the story's outset. A sweet spring breeze stirs the place. A river runs through it, the **River Lethe**, in which memory of sin can be washed away and memory of goodness restored. A woman on the other side of the brook gathers flowers from a garden, which she intimates is **Eden**. In its midst is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, just as described in the book of Genesis. Beatrice arrives in a holy procession, led by a griffin (a medieval symbol of Christ), which pulls behind him a cart which holds the Church. Beatrice is veiled and clad in the colors of the three virtues, who follow in her retinue. She reveals herself to Dante, reproving him for his sins. She reiterates why she first sent Virgil to guide him through Hell and Purgatory, her last-ditch effort to turn Dante from his destructive pursuit of sin back toward virtue and God. Having confronted Dante with his sin of infidelity to her memory, she awaits an answer, demanding that he look her in the eye. His confession comes apace. He admits "Things transitory, with their false delight...enticed my steps aside, soon as your face was hidden from my sight." (*Purgatorio* XXXI, l. 34-36)¹³ As Beatrice gazes on the griffin, the *persona* Dante dutifully gazes into the eyes of Beatrice, seeing the image of the griffin reflected within them. In this way, Dante is overcome with repentance. Aided by Matilda, a lady in the train, in a scene reminiscent of baptism, Dante wades into the River Lethe and is washed clean of his sin, emerging to remember it no more. He arises to behold the four cardinal virtues and the three theological virtues, who call him to gaze upon Beatrice once more. Gazing once again into her eyes, he sees Christ as she, like a mirror, reflects Him. The griffin pulls the cart of the church to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, binding the cart pole to the foot of the tree in symbolic imagery of the cross. Immediately the tree is renewed and blooms afresh.

Part III: *Paradiso*

Summary: In the final book of the *Comedy*, Dante, guided by Beatrice, tours **Heaven**. This involves levitation, which Dante describes as the natural rise of the spirit homeward. Again, their tour progresses through **a series of heavenly spheres. The earth at their center, these spheres radiate out through nine circles to a tenth: Motionless Heaven, called by the medievalists Empyrean.** The Greek word for fire is *pyre*. Empyrean then means "in the fire." Medievalists looked to the burning firmament, radiant with light, and believed it to be the dwelling place of the God of light and all of his radiant saints.



Gustave Dore's depiction of Dante's Paradise

13. Sayers, *Purgatory*, 316.

Sphere-by-Sphere Settings:

Sphere 1: The **first angelic circle** of the universe is the **moon** (Cantos II-IV). Dante conceives of Heaven as a place of light. The outer precincts of Heaven experience less light than the inner precincts. Since the moon is the darkest of the heavenly planets, being furthest from Empyrean, or deep heaven, it is the first circle. Here, **nuns who have failed in their vows against their wills** live in perfect satisfaction, experiencing only blessed happiness and peace, their wills in perfect agreement with God who assigned their place. Thus, though Dante conceives of Heaven as hierarchical, he suggests it void of enmity, envy, or disappointment. In Heaven, all have full access to God, but differ in their capacity to enjoy Him. The distinctions between the degrees of goodness of individual souls and their proximity to God correlates with their understanding and application of righteousness on earth. Thus, in Heaven, too, man's place is decided by his ability to reason. Reasonable behavior leads man to God in Dante's universe.

Sphere 2: The **second sphere** is **Mercury** (Cantos V-VI). **The shades here were somewhat deficient in justice on earth, ambitious for accomplishment and reputation.** Throughout the journey through Heaven, Dante plies Beatrice with theological and philosophical questions.

Sphere 3: The **third sphere** is the planet **Venus** (Cantos VIII-IX). There he encounters the **blessed souls of the passionate**. These loved without self-control and excelled in zeal. Everyone here contemplates the love of God and His goodness, which pulls earth heavenward.

Sphere 4: The **fourth circle** of Heaven is the **Sun**, termed Prudence, symbolic simultaneously of God, of Reason, and of Wisdom (Cantos X-XIV). Here, Dante's love for Beatrice is eclipsed by his love of God. They are ringed round with the souls that inhabit the Sun, theologians and philosophers of note. One of these, St. Thomas Aquinas, enumerates the names of the eleven others that form the first ring and relates the story of St. Francis of Assisi. At his conclusion, another circle of twelve theologians and saints appears, a second aureole, from which St. Bonaventure emerges to name his companions and to relate the story of St. Dominic.

Sphere 5: Dante has a vision of the cross and Christ through the lights and is transmuted to **Mars**, the **fifth circle** of Heaven (Cantos XV-XVIII). Here, Dante encounters one of his own ancestors, who prophesies that Dante will be exiled from his homeland. The spirits in this circle feature many **warriors of renown**, who sing, "Rise and Conquer." After hearing this song, Dante is moved to love. The atmosphere in Heaven makes things grow in beauty as they approach God; so, Beatrice grows in her beauty as they progress through the spheres. Consequently, Dante is drawn to love God, reflected in her, all the more. Dante likens Celestial Heaven to a tree of eternal life.

Sphere 6: In the **sixth sphere** of heaven, **Jupiter** (which Dante also calls Jove), live the spirits of the **just** (Cantos XVIII-XX). They assemble, writing the phrase, "love justice, you who judge the earth," in the sky. The last letter of this phrase, an "m," morphs before Dante's eyes to become an eagle, composed of many historically famous people renowned for justice. An emblem of Rome, this eagle signifies the centrality of Roman principles of judgment to Dante's understanding of justice.¹⁴ From these just souls, Dante learns to define justice as whatever God decrees.

Sphere 7: The **seventh sphere** of Heaven, **Saturn**, holds a gilded ladder (Cantos XXI-XXIII). There it is completely silent. Dante explains that just as Beatrice's beauty is heightened by the soul's ascent, so too are Dante's senses. Dante sees **Mary, the mother of Jesus, with all the saints, the**

14. Sayers, *Paradise*, 218.

apostles, and even Christ stretched toward her in honor. After a series of conversations and tests, Dante and Beatrice ascend the ladder.

Sphere 8: In the **eighth circle**, Dante and Beatrice view the **fixed stars** (Cantos XXIV-XXVII). In the company of **the saints, Mary, and the apostles**, St. Peter gives Dante a catechism test to see if he is worthy of continuing his upward journey. Soon, they are joined by St. James and St. John, who question Dante regarding his understanding of hope and love, respectively. He passes with flying colors and ascends to the **Primum Mobile**.

Sphere 9: In the **ninth circle**, Dante sees the nine circles of Empyrean (Cantos XXVIII-XXIX) reflected in the eyes of Beatrice. Here the saints sing, "*Gloria*." Beatrice orders the **angels in hierarchical rank**. Each angel is a mirror of the light of God, reflecting brighter or lesser light in relation to its knowledge of God.

Sphere 10: In the **tenth sphere** of Heaven, termed **Empyrean**, Dante enters pure light and sees a stream and a Celestial Rose (Cantos XXX-XXXIII). **A white rose that is the church eternal and universal sits in its center. There in the petals, the saints sit upon thrones.** When Dante turns again to seek Beatrice, he finds she has taken her place among her brethren in the rose. St. Bernard will shepherd Dante the remainder of his way to God, praying for grace that Dante's soul would not stray from the God he has learned to love. **In the center of the tip of the rose sits the Queen of Heaven, the Virgin Mary**; at St. Bernard's request, she prays for grace that Dante might see God. As Dante's eye bends toward the yellow center of the flower, his will and desire are moved by the love of the Prime Mover – God, who is portrayed as a trinity of Lights. Dante turns to behold the triune Light, fixing on Christ and yielding to Him in total subjection: "Here power failed the lofty phantasy; but already my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars." (*Paradiso* XXXIII).¹⁵

2. When does this story happen?

The author sets his story in his *persona*'s middle age. The story begins, "Midway in the journey of our life I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost."¹⁶ In fact, the story narrates the **character Dante's midlife crisis**. He has, figuratively speaking, lost his way through the forest that is his life. The journey upon which the protagonist embarks is designed to help him regain "the straight way," by which we are meant to intuit an allusion to Christ's statement, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6).

The author sets his epic in the year 1300; this was **the historic year of the author's biographical political exile**. The character Dante references this date periodically in his conversations with other characters in the story. This places the story firmly in the **Medieval era**. Although the characters and public events Dante alludes to in the story are opaque to today's readers, a good translation provides identifications and explanations that enrich the text's meaning.

The protagonist explains in *Inferno*, Canto I, that the events in the plot begin in the Easter season: "The morn was young, and in his native sign / The Sun climbed with the stars whose glitterings / Attended on him when the Love Divine / First moved those happy, prime-created things: / So the sweet season and the new-born day / Filled me with hope and cheerful augurings...."¹⁷ By the end of *Inferno*, the author makes clear that his protagonist, in fact, embarked on his journey on **Good**

15. Singleton, *Paradiso*, 133.

16. Singleton, *Inferno*, 1.

17. Sayers, *Hell*, 72.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CHARACTERS



3. Who is the story about? (Who is the protagonist?)

The author Dante makes himself the main character of his epic. Of course, readers meet what is really an artificial construct of Dante, a *persona* or mask, rather than the real man. Even so, the author fashions this *persona* from the details of his own life. In this way, the epic functions as a sort of confessional.

In the story, the middle-aged Dante endeavors to climb up a mountain figuratively toward God but is beset by three beasts: a leopard, a lion, and a wolf. Symbolic representations of the carnal sins of lust, violence, and slander, these beasts bar his path and impede his progress. Allegorically, this plot point suggests that in his middle age, Dante is beset in his Christian life by personal sins, which he cannot overcome.

The reality of Dante's implied character flaws becomes apparent in the character Dante's conversations with the shades he meets upon his journey. Discovering his enemies in Hell, Dante gloats. The inclusion of the author's historical enemies within this narrative validates his allegorical confession of slander. His depiction of these persons receiving various imaginative and violent punishments further confirms his confession. Likewise, as the character Dante grieves for the lustful shade Francesca, making light of her adulterous sin in a way that earns him Virgil's rebuke, he proves his confession of lust. It is not until Dante reaches the top of Mount Purgatory that he repents for the specific ways he manifested these sins in his personal history.

Clearly, the *persona* Dante and his author share more than a name. Like the author, the *persona* Dante is a writer. When he meets the shades of the great poets and philosophers in Hell's outer precincts, they honor him for his work: "After they had talked awhile together, they turned to me with sign of salutation, at which my master smiled; and far more honor still they showed me, for they made me one of their company, so that I was sixth amid so much wisdom."¹⁸ In placing his *persona* within the company of Virgil and the great poets, and imagining their praise, Dante the author effects a literary brag. This suggests that both poet and *persona* share the sin of pride, signified by the lion that blocked the protagonist Dante's path on his ascent up the mountain to God.

Also in keeping with the author's real life, Dante's *persona* reveals in conversation with the shades his involvement in political disputes and his resultant banishment from his homeland. The author Dante was indeed involved in such political disputes. In fact, he found himself on the wrong side of a political faction that expelled him from his native Florence and it was during his exile that the poet wrote his *Comedy*.

The *persona* Dante's patron saint, the fair Beatrice, likewise comes from the author's own history. In reality, however, the author never had a romantic relationship with Beatrice. She died of the plague after marrying another. But she had a powerful effect on Dante's life and imagination. The author

18. Singleton, *Inferno*, 5.

records his first meeting with Beatrice and the effect she works upon him in *La Vita Nuova*, suggesting that through her he was inspired to a better, more pious life. In the *Comedy*, the author casts the persona Beatrice as a benefactor, who sends the shade Virgil on a mission to rescue the protagonist Dante from his desperate course and set him on the right road to God.

Throughout the *Comedy*, biographical details from the author's life inform the development of his narrator and protagonist, the *persona* Dante. You can read more about the author in the biographical section of this teacher guide. Throughout the epic, the character Dante displays wit and sensitivity as well as the baser sins of pride, lust, and violence. For readers, he becomes a kind of Everyman.

3. Who else is the story about?

In addition to the protagonist, other significant characters populate the story. Categorically, these include: ancient writers and philosophers, most notably Virgil; characters from Greek and Roman mythology (the boatman Charon, the monster Minos, the three-headed dog Cerberus, etc.); and the author's contemporaries from medieval Europe (notorious popes, authors, politicians, artists, saints, and theologians). These personalities would have been well known to Dante's original audience. Textual notes, however, prove invaluable aids to modern students who would not recognize these allusions. Since the number of shades mentioned throughout the epic are too many to list, we will consider only those most germane to the story's action here.

Virgil: Fashioned after the historic author of Rome's epic *Aeneid*, Virgil serves as Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory. A shade, he is confined to the outer precincts of Hell (called Limbo), where the dim light of reason bears witness to a Truth he will never see. Since the pagan poets never knew Christ, they remain unable to commune with Him. Reason has taken them as close to the Mountain of God as possible without saving knowledge of Jesus. Virgil is granted a brief reprieve from Limbo to conduct Dante through Hell and Purgatory. Acting the part of Dante's tour guide, Virgil identifies the inhabitants of each region and explains their various sins and purgative punishments.

Beatrice: Based upon the author Dante's love interest, the angelic Beatrice plays the role of Dante's patron in the epic, acting as both intermediary and tutor. Compelled by Dante's chivalric devotion to her, Beatrice endeavors to turn him from the path to Hell by providing him with a sneak preview of life after death. She engages the shade Virgil to guide Dante through the Inferno and conduct him to the top of Mount Purgatory. There, Beatrice herself confronts Dante with his history of sinful promiscuity and leads him to repentance. After his baptism, Beatrice functions as a lens through which Dante catches glimpses of the Lord. In this way, Dante's love of Beatrice draws him to a love of God. He travels with Beatrice into the celestial spheres and finally into Empyrean, where his journey culminates in a vision of the divine.

Demons: Interestingly enough, the demons answer to God in Dante's Hell. They serve as prison guards and rule over the oppressed spirits, functioning as instruments of justice in the divine economy.

Satan: Encased in the ice of Lake Cocytus at the very center of Hell, this three-faced anti-Christ, a perversion of the Holy Trinity, gnaws upon the shades of the worst of the betrayers of friends and countrymen: Brutus, Cassius, and Judas Iscariot. Of Satan, Dante writes:

The emperor of the woeful realm stood forth from mid-breast out of the ice; and I in size compare better with a giant than giants with his arms: see now how huge that whole must be to

correspond to such a part. If he was once beautiful as he is ugly now, and lifted up his brows against his Maker, well may all sorrow proceed from him. Oh how great a marvel it was to me when I saw three faces on his head: one in front and it was red, and the other two joined to this just over the middle of each shoulder, and all were joined at the crown. The right one seemed between white and yellow, and the left one was such in appearance as are those who come from whence the Nile descends. From under each there came forth two mighty wings, of size befitting such a bird-sails at sea I never saw so broad. They had no feathers, but were like a bat's. And he was flapping them, so that three winds went forth from him, whereby Cocytus was all congealed. With six eyes he was weeping...."¹⁹

Satan is the emperor of Dante's woeful realm, an anti-type to the heavenly Emperor. His three faces, red, yellow, and black, colorfully symbolize opposition to the heavenly virtues of love, wisdom, and power, with contrasting hatred, ignorance, and impotence.²⁰ With what were once angelic wings, but now more like those of a bat, Satan whips up a cold wind that freezes the lake. Larger than the giants Dante encounters in the Inferno's pits, this devil looms over the lake, torturing his victims. His furry flank becomes a ladder by which the protagonist and Virgil exit the subterranean Inferno and emerge at the foot of Mount Purgatory.

St. Peter: Based upon the biblical apostle, this character holds the keys to the kingdom of Heaven. He sits at the gates of Purgatory, granting entrance to those shades who are worthy to progress up its seven terraces to Heaven and God. He admits Dante and Virgil and causes his angelic servant to mark Dante's head with seven Ps, symbolic of the "capital" sins (*peccata*) for which he will do penance.

Angelic Beings: Like the demons, these too serve the Lord, running errands, ferrying shades, and engaging in the very business of salvation. One descends to the gates of Dis to ensure Dante and Virgil's safe entry. Others mind the various terraces of Purgatory, pronouncing a benediction when a shade attains release. In the ninth circle of Heaven, Dante sees angels in their ranks, and each reflects the glory of God.

Shades in Hell: These miserable ghosts spend their lives receiving the substance of the sin they tasted in the flesh. Their punishments represent the full flowering, the truest sense, of the sin itself, stripped of its deceitful pleasure. Although they have come to know their error, they are unable to repent. In this sense, they have truly lost "the good of intellect."²¹ They speak to Dante, identifying themselves and explaining their sad circumstances. In this way, Dante comes to understand the nature and gravity of sin as misappropriated love. Each shade has either loved the wrong things or has loved the right things disproportionately. Notable among these shades are the fated lovers Paolo and Francesca of the second circle, Dante's angry political enemy Filippo of the fifth circle, his old teacher, the heretic Brunetto, whom he meets in the seventh circle, Simon Magus and Caiaphas from Biblical history, whom he meets in the eighth circle's *Malebowges*, Sinon and Odysseus of Greek legend, the traitors Brutus and Cassius of Roman lore, and Judas Iscariot, betrayer of Jesus Christ, whom he meets at the center of the Inferno.

Shades in Purgatory: These souls suffer the purgative effects of their sins, the retributive nature of their punishments refining their understanding of love and fitting them for fellowship in the heavenly community. Without exception, they all beg Dante, the only person alive among them, to pray for their souls' release upon his return to the world of the flesh. Though they suffer, these shades are im-

19. Singleton, *Inferno*, 43-44.

20. Sayers, *Hell*, 290.

21. Sayers, *Hell*, 85.

measurably more content than their counterparts in Hell; for, they have not lost the ability to repent and turn to God. Dante comes to better understand the nature of love through them. Most notable among these shades is Statius, who came to faith through the work of the pagan Virgil. Also figuring prominently are the three theological virtues, Faith, Hope and Love, who appear to Dante personified in Canto XXXI, together with the symbolic character of the griffin, a medieval symbol of Christ Jesus.

Spirits in Heaven: Each of the beatified persons Dante meets in Heaven is content in the love of God, in harmony with His decrees. They live in various relationships to the Divine in accordance with their capacity to know and enjoy His love. Most notable are Charles Martel, the Hammer, Rahab the harlot of Christ's lineage, medieval scholastic St. Thomas Aquinas, Israel's King Solomon and King David, the monastic St. Benedict, Christ's apostles, Mary the mother of Jesus, and a multitude of other recognizable saints from history.

NOTES:

QUESTIONS ABOUT STRUCTURE: CONFLICT AND PLOT



Throughout this section, you will find parentheticals pointing out common types of literary conflict and where you might notice them in the story. The types of story conflict are: **Man vs. Self**, **Man vs. God**, **Man vs. Man**, **Man vs. Society**, and **Man vs. Nature**.

4. What does the protagonist want?

Dante's *Comedy* is an allegorical theodicy that explores man's pilgrimage on earth, contemplating life's object and desirable ends. In the opening scene of *Inferno*, the character Dante is lost in a dark wood and unsure of how he arrived there. He endeavors to climb up the mountain to God, but his way is barred by three beasts: a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. Medievalists recognize these beasts as representative of three sins: incontinence or lust, violence, and fraud. Dante's description in these early pages reads like a ciphered confession: In his middle age, he has a crisis of faith in which his sins obstruct his progress on the straight path to God. He wants saving. He needs a new perspective about himself, the world, God, and the devil.

Throughout the Comedy, the character Dante desires to find his way, to regain the "straight path."²² Dante is miserable because of his sin. He lacks understanding of the nature of sin and stands in need of knowledge and self-sight. He needs self-control and truthfulness. He needs to repent of idolatry. He needs grace.

5. Why can't he have it?

Dante's beloved Beatrice sends the shade of the Roman poet Virgil on an errand of mercy: By means of a supernatural journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, Virgil will endeavor to educate Dante on the meaning of life and lead his errant soul to safety. Entering Hell, Dante surveys the sign over its portal: "Abandon every hope, you who enter."²³ Virgil explains that Hell's occupants are "the wretched people who have lost the good of intellect."²⁴ This begs the question, *What is the good of intellect? In what way does intellect signify hope?* Dante's journey through Hell reveals that its shades know the reason for their miserable condition. Unfortunately, this knowledge proves useless to them. The fruit of reason is repentance; their time to repent has passed. In the impotence of their tardy knowledge, they suffer.

The remainder of the allegory witnesses Dante's education in wisdom. **Dante lacks knowledge of the good and the dispassionate reason to pursue it.** The fruit of reason is a proper ordering of loves, and at the beginning of the epic, Dante's loves are disordered. At times he prizes the wrong things, like money and power (the she-wolf and the lion). At other times he loves the right things, but inordinately. One example of this is the perversion of love to lust (the leopard). Dante's journey will teach him the wisdom of reasonably ordering his affections. (**Man vs. Self; Man vs. God**)

22. Singleton, *Inferno*, 1.

23. Singleton, *Inferno*, 3.

24. Singleton, *Inferno*, 3.

In *Inferno*, Dante sees the consequence of disordered love: The sins of the shades are in full bloom and therefore clearly visible. For example, in the second circle, the lustful are blown about by a hot wind, never achieving their object – literally tossed about by their own desires. In the third circle, the gluttons lie in a vomitous rain. In every circle, the punishment of individual sins is retributive in nature, illustrative of the character and consequence of the sin itself. Crimes of passion are depicted not as excessive loves, but rather a misdirection of those loves toward the self. (**Man vs. Man; Man vs. Self**) Crimes against nature are depicted as a love of the gift instead of the Giver. (**Man vs. Nature; Man vs. God; Man vs. Self**) Crimes of violence are a contradiction of love. (**Man vs. Man; Man vs. Self; Man vs. Society**) In every instance, a proper love has been misdirected, mis-prioritized, or perverted.

In *Purgatorio*, Dante continues to interview shades who failed to acknowledge the love of God and their fellow man properly during their lifetimes. To prepare for an eternity of communion, these shades are purged from their sin and schooled in love through converse (read: allegorical) punishments. Like the damned shades in Hell, these souls suffer; however, their confession of Christ has saved them from Hell and placed them on a purgative path to God.

Even in *Paradiso*, Dante finds evidence of reward and punishment, its inhabitants placed in positions of nearness to God commensurate with the degree to which they have developed their aptitude to love Him. While each has achieved Heaven, few have gained access to the inner circle of love inhabited by the divine family and the apostles. Nevertheless, all rejoice as they receive and exchange love according to their capacity.

At the pinnacle of his journey, Dante has a vision of the Divine Love and yields himself to God: “Here power failed the lofty phantasy; but already my desire and my will were revolved, like a wheel that is evenly moved, by the Love which moves the sun and the other stars.”²⁵ Although Dante’s capacity to take in the divine vision finds its limit, the “phantasy” leaves him infused with the hopeful potential of knowledge and reason, newly determined to increase his own capacity to love and to order his affections. Courtly love has rescued him; divine love has saved him.

6. What other problems are there in the story?

Dante’s journey transpires in colorfully allegorical terms. Each circle is an episode ripe with revelation of the nature of reason, the nature of sin, and Dante’s own failings. The question remains whether Dante will effectively learn the lessons set before him. ***Will Dante employ his reason to identify his own misdirected, inordinate affections and repent? Will he discover his sin in time?*** This is a **Man vs. Self** conflict, as the *persona* Dante not only lacks wisdom to understand his sin, but also evades its discovery, being loath to know himself as a sinner in particular details.

Periodically throughout Dante’s journey through Hell, he is antagonized by shades and demons (**Man vs. Man**); yet, Virgil and even angelic messengers give him safe passage where no living man has traveled apart from Christ Jesus. In *Purgatorio*, Dante receives the mark of sin upon his brow, but the question remains: ***Will his eyes be opened and his sins removed as he climbs toward the mountaintop? Will he see himself and repent?*** (**Man vs. Self**)

In *Paradiso*, Dante continues his ascent to God. The reader may wonder, ***How can Dante see God and live?*** (**Man vs. God**) In Heaven as in Hell, Dante relies on divine protection as he travels places unexplored by corporal men. He glimpses the light of God in the eyes of Beatrice. With her, he enters the Empyrean, and there his sight is strengthened to see the apostles and saints of the blessed

25. Singleton, *Paradiso*, 133.

church, Christ's bride, seated on thrones arranged as a rose window in a heavenly cathedral, bathed in light. In the center of this snow-white Celestial Rose, Dante beholds the three-fold Godhead, manifested as three celestial spheres, and he is moved to exalt his love of God above all the other loves in his life. "So strove I with that wonder—how to fit the image to the sphere; so sought to see how it maintained the point of rest in it. . . the love that moves the sun and the other stars."²⁶ When love of God becomes the central preoccupation of man, all of the created goods find their rightful place in the cosmic hierarchy.

7. How is the main problem solved?

This question has a multifaceted answer. Immediately, it is solved by the errand of Beatrice, who was moved to act on Dante's behalf because of **courtly love**. It would be fair to say that courtly love saves Dante from his wandering, disordered love. Critic Charles Williams suggests that Dante was, in writing the *Comedy*, asserting a theology of romantic love. This suggests that romantic love (in particular unrequited love of the courtly fashion) elevates the soul of the lover, ennobling him to higher acts of virtue and, consequently, leading him to God.

Within the story, Dante's journey through the world of shades leads him to wisdom and repentance. It could be argued that **intellect** and **reason** properly employed save Dante. The protagonist's loatheness, however, to make personal inferences regarding sin and its consequences persists until the Lady Beatrice confronts him at the pinnacle of Mount Purgatory. She becomes therefore the agent of truth to him, compelling him to repent and be baptized. As he gazes into her eyes, he finds a symbolic reflection of his savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, figured in the griffin: "When my face was lifted up, my sight perceived those primal creatures resting from their strewing; and my eyes, still little assured, saw Beatrice turned toward the animal that is one person in two natures. . . Such contrition stung my heart that I fell overcome; and what I then became she knows who was the cause of it."²⁷ This furnishes Dante with pious repentance, and he is helped to the stream for a final cleansing by the Lady Matilda. "When I was close to the blessed shore, I heard '*Asperges me*' sung so sweetly that I cannot remember it, far less write it. The fair lady opened her arms, clasped my head and dipped me under, where it behooved me to swallow of the water."²⁸

This **repentance** and **baptism** purge Dante of guilt and fit him for his journey through paradise to the Empyrean. Here, his schooling is complete. In his conversations with the saints, he learns to speak truth and to love its source. In God's light, Dante finds that all other lights pale. The radiance and love of God compel Dante's "will and desire" to responsive love of God, in which all other loves consist.

8. How does the story end?

Dante's vision of Divine Love and radiance confirm and unite his heart in love for God. He explains: "In that Light one becomes such that it is impossible he should ever consent to turn himself from it for other sight; for the good, which is the object of the will, is all gathered in it, and outside of it that is defective which is perfect there."²⁹ In the Divine Light, Dante discovers, all other loves consist.

26. Singleton, *Paradiso*, 136-145.

27. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 85.

28. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 85-86.

29. Singleton, *Paradiso*, 133.

QUESTIONS ABOUT STYLE: LITERARY DEVICES



An **epic**, *The Divine Comedy* employs many of the usual epic devices. Look for the following:

Stock Epithets: “the blessed Beatrice”

Epic Similes: Like simple similes, these comparisons using “like” or “as” extend over many lines. (Socratic Question 16.d.)

Like as the starlings wheel in the wintry season
In wide and clustering flocks wing-borne, wind-borne
Even so they go, the souls who did this treason,
Hither and thither, and up and down, outworn,
Hopeless of any rest – rest, did I say?
Of the least minishing of their pangs forlorn.
And as the cranes go chanting their harsh lay,
Across the sky in long procession trailing,
So I beheld some shadows borne my way,
Driven on the blast and uttering wail on wailing....³⁰

In this quote, Dante compares the driven souls to starlings blown ceaselessly about by the wind. Likewise, he likens their lament to the harsh cries of flying cranes.

Beginning *In Media Res* (“In the midst of things”): Dante’s epic begins in his protagonist’s middle-age. “Midway this way of life we’re bound upon, / I woke to find myself in a dark wood....”³¹

Epic Catalogues: In the ancient Greek and Roman epics, these list the names of warriors and their deeds. In the *Comedy*, they take the shape of historic political, Biblical, and literary personages.

Gods and Heroes: In particular, Dante portrays the trinitarian God of the Bible: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In addition, heroes of the faith such as St. Peter, the other apostles, and the Catholic Church saints figure prominently, especially in *Paradiso*.

A Decent into the Underworld: The entire first book, *Inferno*, takes place in the world of the damned shades.

A Vast Setting: It doesn’t get much vaster than Dante’s setting, which ranges from earth to the depths of Hell, the slopes of Purgatory, and the heights of heaven’s Empyrean. Even beyond these geographical settings, Dante’s makes a setting of the battleground of the human soul.

Invocation of the Muse: This usually comes in the first book of an epic, and serves as an early nar-

30. Sayers, *Hell*, 98.

31. Sayers, *Hell*, 71.

ration of subject matter and theme. Dante saves his invocation for Canto II of *Inferno*: “O Muses, O high genius, help me now! O memory that wrote down what I saw, here shall your worthiness appear!”³² Although Dante omits a summary narrative in his invocation, he does lay the framework for his narrative and hint at his subject matter and themes near the end of *Inferno* 1, briefly outlining the three books and their purpose:

But, as for thee, I think and deem it well
 Thou take me for thy guide, and pass with me
 Through an eternal place and terrible
 Where thou shalt hear despairing cries, and see
 Long-parted souls that in their torments dire
 Howl for the second death perpetually.
 Next, thou shalt gaze on those who in the fire
 Are happy, for they look to mount on high,
 In God’s good time, up to the blissful quire;
 To which glad place, a worthier spirit than I
 Must lead thy steps, if thou desire to come,
 With whom I’ll leave thee then, and say good-bye;
 For the Emperor of that high Imperium
 Wills not that I, once rebel to His crown,
 Into that city of His should lead men home.
 Everywhere is His realm, but there His throne,
 There is His city and exalted seat:
 Thrice-blest whom there He chooses for His own!³³

14. Does the author use the sounds of our language to create interest in his story?

Dante composed his *Divine Comedy* in *terza rima*, or “three rhyme.” Scholars speculate that Dante invented this rhyme scheme as an homage to the Holy Trinity, thus making his narrative’s theological game concrete at the molecular or structural level of the poem. Poems composed in *terza rima* take an interlocking rhyme scheme of ABA BCB CDC DED and so on. The echo of each middle line’s end rhyme in its subsequent tercet generates an effect of forward movement that simulates the persona Dante’s progress on his journey through the three planes of the epic landscape. Poets composing in *terza rima* generally end their verse with a single line or a rhyming couplet that takes the rhyme of the middle line of the final tercet. Though obviously impressive on such a massive scale as the *Comedy*, *terza rima* is fairly easy to achieve in an inflected language like Dante’s Italian. However, it is much more difficult to approximate in the English language because of the diversity of word endings. Consequently, few translators attempt it. Dorothy Sayers manages to retain this element in her translation. For example:

Midway this way of life we’re bound upon,	A
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,	B
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.	A
Ay me! How hard to speak of it—that rude	B
And rough and stubborn forest! The mere breath	C
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;	B
It is so bitter, it goes night to death;	C
Yet there I gained such good, that, to convey	D
The tale, I’ll write what else I found therewith... ³⁴	C

32. Singleton, *Inferno*, 2.

33. Sayers, *Hell*, 74.

34. Singleton, *Inferno*, 71.

Metrically speaking, most English poets work in *iambic pentameter* when using *terza rima*. Translator Dorothy Sayers translates Dante's *Comedy* in this meter (as exemplified in the excerpt above). Poets working in iambic pentameter write five iambic feet (unstressed "U" and stressed "/" syllable) per line:

U / | U / | U / | U / | U /
"The tale, I'll write what else I found therewith."

Dante composed his Italian verse in *hendecasyllable*, a common meter in Italian poetry defined by a constant accent on the tenth syllable of every line. Dante added to this meter an accent on the sixth syllable of each line as well (i.e. "*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*").

16. Does the author use descriptions and comparisons to create pictures in the reader's mind?

Imagery: Does the author rely upon similes, metaphors, or personification to convey his meaning more powerfully?

The poet Dante creates masterful images throughout the *Comedy*. In *Paradiso*, he creates an image of Empyrean heaven, or deep heaven, wherein **the virgin Mary is seated surrounded by the elect**. He depicts this scene as **a rose window**, an architectural feature common to medieval cathedrals. As the persona Dante gazes upon Mary and the elect, they encourage him to gaze through them to behold **the three-in-one light that is God**. The light flows through them as through a rose window, and gazing upon it, Dante's will and desire are moved by the love of the Prime Mover:

So now, displayed before me as a rose
Of snow-white purity, the sacred might
I saw, whom with His blood Christ made His spouse.
But the other, winging ever in His sight,
Chants praises to the glory it adores,
Its Maker's good extolling in delight.
As bees ply back and forth, now in the flowers
Busying themselves, and now intent to wend
Where all their toil is turned to sweetest stores,
So did the host of Angels now descend
Amid the Flower of the countless leaves,
Now rise to where their love dwells without end...³⁵

Dante's loves are permanently reordered by this vision of Divine Light to reflect the will of God. He has found the right path once more.

Personification: Do things or creatures speak with human voices, expressing rational thoughts and ideas?

Examples of this abound in the *Comedy*. Among these are the trees of the suicides in Canto XIII. Likewise, the theological virtues in Canto XXIX of *Purgatorio* are personified.

35. Sayers, *Paradise*, 327.

17. Does the author use the characters and events in the story to communicate a theme that goes beyond them in some way?

Irony:

There are three types of irony in literature: **verbal irony** (also termed sarcasm), **circumstantial irony**, and **dramatic irony**. Verbal irony involves a statement whose implied meaning is contrary to its literal meaning. Circumstantial irony involves a disparity between expected and actual circumstances. Dramatic (sometimes called tragic) irony occurs most often in stage plays when a speaker knows less about his true circumstances than the audience.

Although the author utilizes all of these, he makes special use of circumstantial and dramatic irony. The extraordinary circumstances in which the protagonist Dante discovers various shades startles him as much as their explanations satisfy him. Many of these shades appeal to Dante for information regarding the world of the living since death has deprived them of this. Dante, who remains in possession of this information, has knowledge they themselves do not, creating moments of dramatic irony. Throughout the *Comedy*, Dante discovers the shades he meets in circumstances directly analogous to sins or behaviors they committed during their lives on earth. They receive retributive justice, or *contrapasso*, in the afterlife. For example: In the third circle of *Inferno*, Dante meets a shade nicknamed Ciaccio (Italian for pig) by his former neighbors. Gluttonous in life, he spends his eternity mired in muck and lying in a disgusting acid rain of refuse and vomit. He explains:

Ciaccio you citizens nicknamed me – alack!
Damable gluttony was my soul’s disease;
See how I waster for it now in the rain’s wrack.
And I, poor sinner, am not alone: all these
Lie bound in the like penalty with me
For the like offence.³⁶

On Mount Purgatory, Dante finds a similar organizing principle. Purgatory is laid out to purge those who have fallen prey to perverted love, which the poet terms the source of all sin. Those in Purgatory have either loved the wrong things, or the right things the wrong way (in excess or deficiency). Everyone loves himself, and by extension God since He is the ultimate source of man’s being. Where man fails is in love for his neighbor. The cornices of Purgatory correlate with these failures, which evidence themselves as pride, envy, wrath, sloth, covetousness, gluttony, and lust – which Catholic doctrine terms the seven deadly sins. It is from these that the penitent souls will be purged, again with a cure of like producing like. For example: The penitent gluttons in Purgatory are made to suffer hunger while having their appetite pricked by the scents of a verdant tree. (The whip of gluttony is hunger.) Meanwhile, a voice from the tree proclaims its fruit forbidden. Throughout their suffering, they chant, “Blessed are they whom so great grace illumines... / that in their bosom’s core / The palate’s lust kindles no craving fumes, / and righteousness is all they hunger for.”³⁷ On this terrace, Dante meets the once gluttonous Donati and hears his explanation:

By subtle virtue I’m refined
That from the eternal counsel whence it springs
Falls on the tree and water there behind;
And all this multitude that weeps and sings
By dearth and drouth is here re-sanctified

36. Sayers, *Hell*, 105.

37. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 258.

from an excessive greed of life's good things.³⁸

Deprivation serves as the just penalty that sanctifies the repentant glutton.

Even in Paradise, this element of retributive justice remains operative. Those who loved and lived most purely live closest to the Son in Empyrean. The blessed are placed in the heavenlies according to their capacity to enjoy God. Canto II of *Paradiso* explains these arrangements: Nuns who have failed in their vows through no fault of their own explain to Dante the perfect happiness and peace of heaven, regardless of their geographical closeness to the Empyrean. Their wills conform to God in perfect agreement of His just decrees: "Brother, our love has laid our wills to rest, / Making us long only for what is ours, / And by no other thirst to be possessed. / ...Nay, 'tis the essence of our blissful fate / To dwell in the divine will's radius, / Wherein our wills themselves are integrate...."³⁹ The blessed are perfectly satisfied with what the just God has ascribed to them.

Allusion: Does the author refer to other works of literature, historical events, works of art, or well-known ideas in his work?

The author employs allusions to such an extent that readers require a scholarly translation to recognize them all. He recalls the sins and piety of historical personalities and literary figures as he progresses through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. By placing known figures in various levels of the afterlife and by dramatizing conversations between them and the protagonist, he presents his concept of the retributive nature of divine justice and the fathomless depths of divine wisdom and love.

For example, when Dante encounters Odysseus in Canto XXVI, readers are meant to remember Odysseus's role in the theft of the Palladium stone and his participation in the ruse that destroyed Troy. In *Inferno*, Odysseus is branded an "evil counselor" for indulging in selfish wandering, abandoning the duties of manhood, and encouraging his men to do likewise. Similarly, when Dante reaches the center of Hell he discovers the Roman senators Brutus and Cassius, leaders of the assassination of Caesar, together with Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of the Lord Jesus Christ, hanging from the maws of the three-faced Satan, encased in the ice of Lake Cocytus. In this way, the author casts betrayers of lords and kinsmen as the worst of sinners.

Likewise, Dante imports a variety of theological and philosophical doctrines. For instance, the notice above the gate to Hell alludes to the Christian theology of *ex nihilo* Creation and the sovereignty, wisdom, and justice of God. Another example occurs in Canto XXXII of *Purgatorio*, which references the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, thus alluding to the events of the Fall of man and Christ's subsequent actions to redeem mankind. Finally, the baptism scene in Canto XXXI of *Purgatorio* references the River Lethe, the mythological river of forgetfulness, which causes the *persona* Dante to forget his past sins even as God has forgiven and forgotten them. These represent only a few of the variety of theological allusions Dante employs within the scope of his *Comedy*.

Notable literary source texts alluded to throughout the *Comedy* include: Virgil's *Aeneid*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Boethius' *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and Dante's own *La Vita Nuova*, among many others.

Symbolism:

Symbolic imagery abounds in the *Comedy*. Images of Christ as our pelican, divine light, and a medi-

38. Singleton, *Purgatorio*, 248-249.

39. Sayers, *Paradise*, 75.

eval griffin expand our understanding of His person and work.

Does the author use any objects or ideas to refer to or embody a character quality or personal trait?

Consider for example the personification of the three theological graces (faith, hope, and love) in Beatrice’s procession with the griffin in Canto XXX of *Purgatorio*. Additionally, the author’s extensive allusions to historical and literary figures allow him to characterize specific sins to demonstrate the retributive nature of divine justice.

Does the author use any objects, persons, pictures, or things to represent an idea in the story?

Examples of this abound. Consider a few:

Dante’s inclusion of the pagan poet Virgil (throughout *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*) suggests the extent to which reason may guide man to God.

The cart drawn by the griffin represents the universal Church, the bride of Christ.

The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, recalls the fruit by which mankind fell into sin and death.

The griffin, symbolic of Jesus, pulls the cart of the Church to the base of the tree, propping the pole like a cross beam against its trunk in an image of the cross, through which redemption came. These symbolic allusions in conjunction suggest the victorious work of Christ Jesus to redeem mankind.

Does the author call one thing or object by another?

Throughout the Comedy, the poet uses metaphor to characterize sin. For example, thieves in the *Inferno* are monstrous shape shifters, who, having lost sight of the boundaries of self and others, experience this conflation eternally.⁴⁰ In *Purgatorio*, Christ is depicted as a griffin, a mythical beast part lion, part eagle, that conjures an image of divine power and protection.⁴¹ (*Purgatorio* XXXII). In *Paradiso*, in Canto XXXIII, the poet depicts God as Light, which reorders man’s unruly passions. By his persistent use of metaphor and symbolism, the poet conveys elements of his theme and theology, including the concepts of retributive justice, divine sovereignty, power, and love, and the centrality of human reason in man’s journey to God.

NOTES:

40. Sayers, *Hell*, 228-229.

41. Sayers, *Purgatory*, 322-326.

QUESTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT:



18. Who is the author?

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)

Italian author, allegorist, poet, political theorist, literary critic, philosopher, and theologian, Dante Alighieri was the first notable author to write in his native vernacular. For this, Dante termed his epic work *The Comedy*, setting it apart from the works of his scholarly contemporaries, which employed the customary Latin. Modern use of the term *comedy* to imply humor differs from its medieval usage, defining a lower form of drama most noteworthy for its happy ending. The epic's title is a verbal play on words, which gives a nod to the epic's base, vernacular language and its low genre.

Scholars divine much of what is known of Dante's life from his early work, *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*). The lady Beatrice makes her first appearance in this work and appears again as a major character in the *Comedy*. Dante uses prose and poetry to tell the story of his first encounter with Beatrice at the age of nine, a later chance meeting at the age of eighteen, during which she refused to acknowledge him, his subsequent endeavor to become a better man and win her respect, and her ultimate death from the plague. Dante's limited experience with Beatrice forged in him what most would consider a disproportionate admiration and love. Regarding her as pure and holy, Dante saw in Beatrice a goodness that called him to greater moral rectitude, drawing his spirit toward God in much the same fashion as the medieval knight's chivalric patronage of a lady. Dante would pursue the nature of this chivalric love in his epic verse.

In addition to an early glimpse of Beatrice, *La Vita Nuova* contains an account of the political tensions that divided Florence in Dante's lifetime. Struggles between the Guelfs and the Ghibellines, as well as disagreements within these parties, bred unrest within Dante's native land. These factions would eventually result in Dante's exile. It was during these expatriate wanderings that Dante composed his *Comedy*, which not only contains allusions to this life-altering event, but also figures many of his political opponents prominently as shades in Hell. When the *Comedy* was published to great acclaim, the people of Florence invited Dante to return to his homeland; bitter about his exile, Dante refused.

The theme of Beatrice's influence recurs in Dante's *Il Convivio* (*The Banquet*). This poetic work depicts the poet's search for consolation after Beatrice's death in the subject of philosophy. This subject became a temporary diversion (or mistress, if you will) for the poet. *Il Convivio* draws greatly on the works of Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*. In it, Dante argues that the liberal arts provide a proper feast for the mind and soul of man and speed him on his path to God and virtue. The *Comedy* would later illustrate this argument in fiction. Likewise, in *Il Convivio*, Dante makes a convincing argument for the use of the vernacular to create a truly national poetry.

Dante began his epic *Comedy* before 1308 and completed it in 1321, just prior to his death. Its publication and wide reception earned him the title *divino poeta*, the divine poet, from which moniker his *Comedy* was likewise titled retrospectively "Divine." Even so, it was not until the American poet and

professor of literature Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1822) translated the work into modern English that the epic received its place in the Western Canon. Longfellow prefaced his translation with a poem of his own, an homage to the *divina poeta* and his poem, included below:

Divina Commedia

BY HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

Oft have I seen at some cathedral door
A laborer, pausing in the dust and heat,
Lay down his burden, and with reverent feet
Enter, and cross himself, and on the floor
Kneel to repeat his paternoster o'er;
Far off the noises of the world retreat;
The loud vociferations of the street
Become an undistinguishable roar.
So, as I enter here from day to day,
And leave my burden at this minster gate,
Kneeling in prayer, and not ashamed to pray,
The tumult of the time disconsolate
To inarticulate murmurs dies away,
While the eternal ages watch and wait.

II

How strange the sculptures that adorn these towers!
This crowd of statues, in whose folded sleeves
Birds build their nests; while canopied with leaves
Parvis and portal bloom like trellised bowers,
And the vast minster seems a cross of flowers!
But fiends and dragons on the gargoyled eaves
Watch the dead Christ between the living thieves,
And, underneath, the traitor Judas lowers!
Ah! from what agonies of heart and brain,
What exultations trampling on despair,
What tenderness, what tears, what hate of wrong,
What passionate outcry of a soul in pain,
Uprose this poem of the earth and air,
This mediæval miracle of song!

I enter, and I see thee in the gloom
Of the long aisles, O poet saturnine!
And strive to make my steps keep pace with thine.
The air is filled with some unknown perfume;
The congregation of the dead make room
For thee to pass; the votive tapers shine;
Like rooks that haunt Ravenna's groves of pine
The hovering echoes fly from tomb to tomb.
From the confessionals I hear arise
Rehearsals of forgotten tragedies,
And lamentations from the crypts below;
And then a voice celestial that begins

With the pathetic words, "Although your sins
As scarlet be," and ends with "as the snow."

With snow-white veil and garments as of flame,
She stands before thee, who so long ago
Filled thy young heart with passion and the woe
From which thy song and all its splendors came;
And while with stern rebuke she speaks thy name,
The ice about thy heart melts as the snow
On mountain heights, and in swift overflow
Comes gushing from thy lips in sobs of shame.
Thou makest full confession; and a gleam,
As of the dawn on some dark forest cast,
Seems on thy lifted forehead to increase;
Lethe and Eunoë — the remembered dream
And the forgotten sorrow — bring at last
That perfect pardon which is perfect peace.

I lift mine eyes, and all the windows blaze
With forms of Saints and holy men who died,
Here martyred and hereafter glorified;
And the great Rose upon its leaves displays
Christ's Triumph, and the angelic roundelays,
With splendor upon splendor multiplied;
And Beatrice again at Dante's side
No more rebukes, but smiles her words of praise.
And then the organ sounds, and unseen choirs
Sing the old Latin hymns of peace and love
And benedictions of the Holy Ghost;
And the melodious bells among the spires
O'er all the house-tops and through heaven above
Proclaim the elevation of the Host!

O star of morning and of liberty!
O bringer of the light, whose splendor shines
Above the darkness of the Apennines,
Forerunner of the day that is to be!
The voices of the city and the sea,
The voices of the mountains and the pines,
Repeat thy song, till the familiar lines
Are footpaths for the thought of Italy!
Thy fame is blown abroad from all the heights,
Through all the nations, and a sound is heard,
As of a mighty wind, and men devout,
Strangers of Rome, and the new proselytes,
In their own language hear thy wondrous word,
And many are amazed and many doubt.

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:



1. How does Dante portray divine judgment in the *Comedy*?
2. What do Dante's depictions of courtly love suggest about its nature and usefulness?
3. An allegorical theodicy, Dante's *Comedy* explores man's pilgrimage on earth, its object and desirable ends. What does Dante conclude is the chief end of man on earth, and how does his allegory illustrate this?
4. What is the nature of sin according to the *Comedy*?
5. According to the *Comedy*, what is the role of reason in the salvation of man?
6. What distinguishes the shades Dante encounters in *Inferno* from those he meets in *Purgatorio*?
7. If the *Comedy* is about the *persona*'s journey to recover the "right path," what is that path? How does Dante find it?
8. If the *Comedy* is indeed a love story, whose love does it most prominently figure and what is the nature of that love?

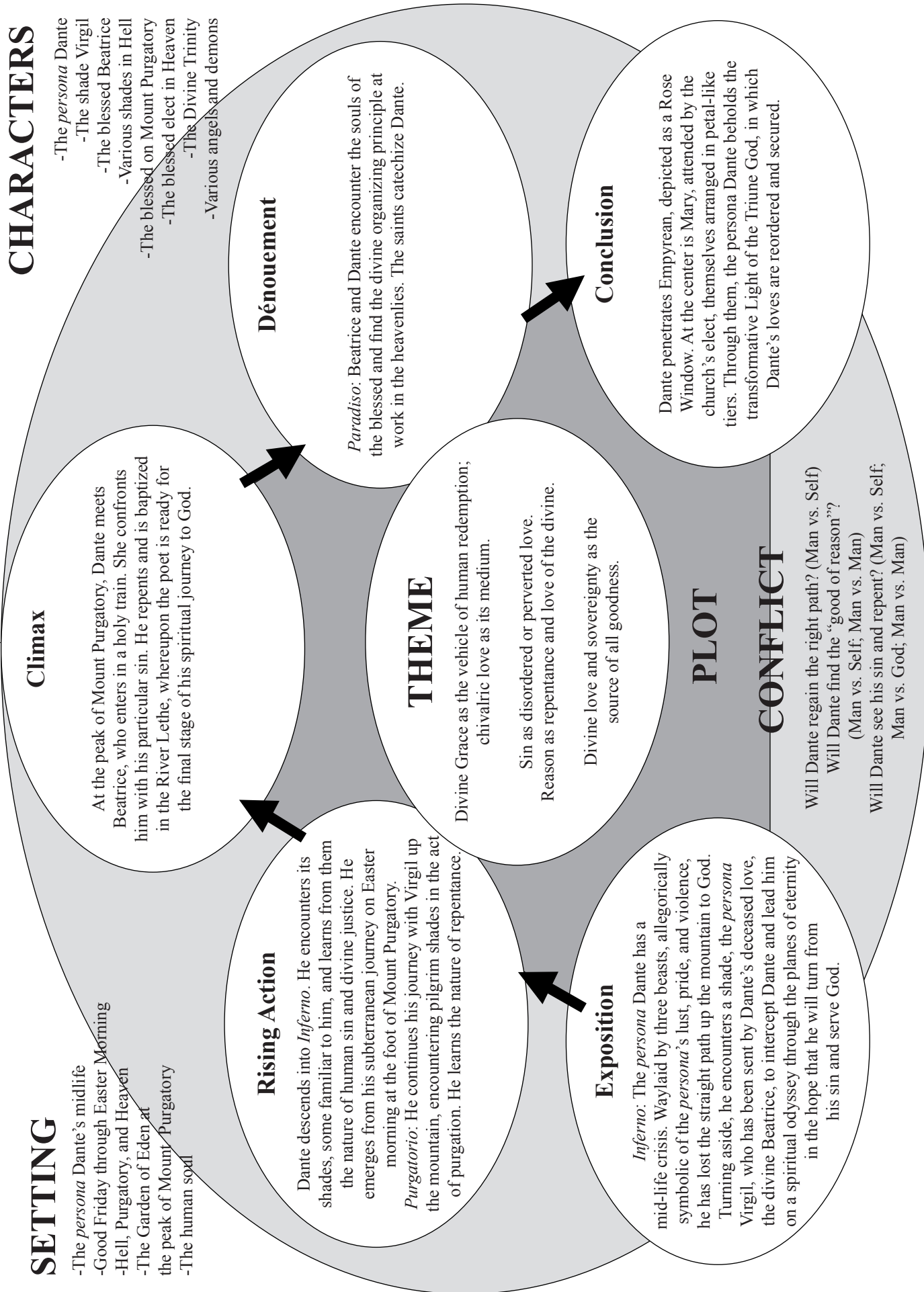
STORY CHARTS



The following pages contain story charts of the type presented in the live seminar *Teaching the Classics*. As is made clear in that seminar, a separate story chart may be constructed for each of the conflicts present in a work of fiction. In particular, the reader's decision as to the *climax* and central *themes* of the plot structure will depend upon his understanding of the story's central conflict. As a result, though the details of setting, characters, exposition, and conclusion may be identical from analysis to analysis, significant variation may be found in those components which appear down the center of the story chart: Conflict, Climax, and Theme. This of course results from the fact that literary interpretation is the work of active minds, and differences of opinion are to be expected — even encouraged!

For the teacher's information, one story chart has been filled in on the next page. In addition, a blank chart is included to allow the teacher to examine different conflicts in the same format.

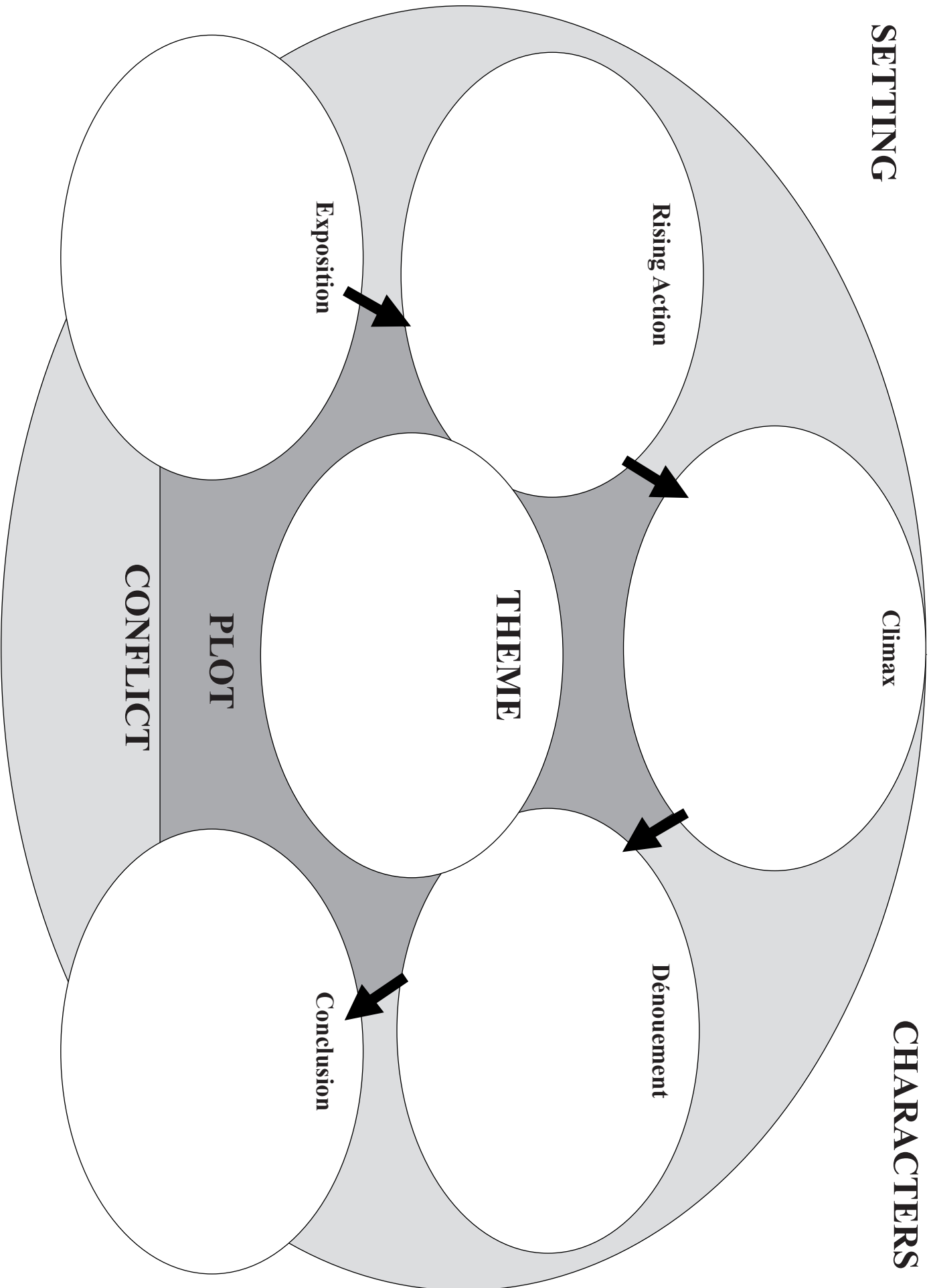
Story Chart: *The Divine Comedy*



Story Chart: *The Divine Comedy*

SETTING

CHARACTERS



APPENDIX: THEMATIC ESSAY



A Love Story in Three Acts

Courtly love finds its origins in the medieval era's chivalric code. Unlike its romantic counterpart, this chaste, often unrequited love was thought to elevate the ethical character and conduct of the chivalric lover, ennobling him and drawing him up to superior bravery and action. This ideal is evident in multiple references of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The most notable of these is the courtly relationship between the *persona* Dante and the character Beatrice. The figure of Beatrice presupposes that chivalric love is a good, rather than an evil, and Dante's entire three part work is predicated on this assumption. The author uses the relationship between Beatrice and Dante to suggest that chivalric love can restore man to God.

It is Beatrice, Dante's beloved favorite, who makes suit for Dante's soul. It is she who sends the shade of Virgil to intercept Dante, lost and in flight from the beasts of fraud, violence, and lust, sins that have impeded his upward ascent on the right path (Singleton 1). Compassion for him and faithfulness to his remembered love for her provoke her intervention and inspire her plan to woo his heart to God through a pre-death tour of the afterworlds. Virgil's shade relates his meeting with Beatrice:

I was among those who are suspended, and a lady called me, so blessed and fair that I prayed her to command me. Her eyes were more resplendent than the stars, and she began to say to me, sweetly and softly, in an angelic voice, 'O courteous Mantuan spirit, whose fame still lasts in the world...my friend – and not the friend of Fortune – finds his way so impeded on the desert slope that he has turned back in fright; and from what I have heard of him in Heaven, I fear he may already have gone so astray that I am late in arising to help him. Go now, and with your fair speech and with whatever is needful for his deliverance, assist him so that it may console me. I am Beatrice who send you. ... Love moved me and makes me speak.' (2)

Beatrice's love for Dante moves her to send the guide Virgil. Dante's love for Beatrice compels him to follow.

Beatrice is not alone in her intent to restore Dante to the proper path. She cites as conspiring benefactresses two other heavenly ladies, Lucy and Mary, who urge her to her office and duty toward Dante as the object of his enduring chivalric love. Virgil relates Beatrice's explanation to Dante:

In Heaven there is a gracious lady who has such pity of this impediment to which I send you that stern judgment is broken thereabove. She is called Lucy, in her request, and said, 'Your faithful one has need of you now, and I command him to you.' Lucy, foe of every cruelty, arose and, coming to where I sat with ancient Rachel, said, 'Beatrice, true praise of God, why do you not succor him who bore you such love that for you he left the vulgar throng? Do you not hear his pitiful lament? Do you not see the death that assails him on that flood over which the sea

has no vaunt?’(3)

It would seem that the heavenly inhabitants themselves adhere to and exalt the courtly love paradigm, inducing Beatrice to action and consenting to new and unprecedented means by which to honor love’s duty to the chivalric lover Dante. Clear, too, is their objective: to affect the salvation of the *persona* Dante’s soul, rescuing him from certain death. Beatrice, figure of chivalric love, mediates divine compassion to Dante through these rescue attempts.

Throughout the *Comedy*, Beatrice works to woo Dante to God, using the *persona*’s affection for her as a means to that end. With argumentation and mediation, she will turn his mind from error to reason, both by demonstrating the cause and effect of various loves, and by herself embodying the love of God, which shines through her in her beatified state. First, she plans to show Dante the unfortunate souls in the Inferno who have, in one way or another, perverted love. These damned souls have “lost the good of intellect” (3). As Dante travels through the Inferno, he witnesses the effects of this lost “good,” encountering at every level of hell shades who, although they are able to see their error and sin clearly, remain unable to repent and receive forgiveness. Thus, the good that intellect might do them is lost; they cannot profit from their sight of self. Their misery alone remains as they endure forever their irremediable errors. Beatrice conceives of Dante’s journey as a sort of last ditch rescue mission to deliver him from this same misery, explaining this in Canto XXX of the *Purgatorio*:

So soon as I was on the threshold of my second age and had changed life, this one took himself from me and gave himself to others. When from flesh to spirit I had ascended, and beauty and virtue were increased in me, I was less dear and less pleasing to [Dante] and he turned his steps along a way not true, following false images of good, which pay no promise in full. Nor did it avail me to obtain inspirations with which, both in dream and otherwise, I called him back, so little did he heed them. He fell so low that all means for his salvation were now short, save to show him the lost people. For this I visited the gate of the dead, and to him who has conducted him up hither my prayers were offered with tears. (84-85)

Beatrice hopes that by showing Dante the “lost people” he might learn the end of perverse loves and avoid their consequences.

In particular, Dante observes the end of perverse chivalric love as he passes through the second circle of the Inferno, the habitation of the lustful. There he recognizes the shades of Francesca and Paolo, the former relating how her own courtly romance was charged into lustful adultery by means of a chivalric romance novel. While the yet immature *persona* Dante grieves for her, Francesca’s tone of self-pity suggests her famous love to have been both selfish and fleshly in nature: “Love, which is quickly kindled in a gentle heart, seized this one for the fair form that was taken from me... Love brought us to one death” (7). Neither Paolo nor Francesca were willing to sacrifice their own desire for the good of the other. Far from demonstrating noble self control, each yielded to their own fleshly desires, costing their lovers not only their lives and honor, but ultimately their eternal souls. Whether Dante swoons for the empathy he bears Francesca, or for the sight of his own lustful heart which her words afford him, the author does not say. Regardless, the character Dante clearly perceives by this encounter what he confirms as he continues his descent through the nine circles of hell. Though Dante encounters sinners of every variety on his journey, perverse love defines them all. Throughout the course of their earthly lives, these lost shades had either loved the wrong things, or had loved the right things the wrong way. From the glutton Ciaccio, who loved the food that sustained him more than the God who provided it, to the magician Simon Magus, who sought supernatural power for the sake of garnering not God’s, but his own reputation, each shade perverted

the good that they sought by making it primary. Beatrice, by her better love, affords Dante a valuable glimpse of the destiny of the disordered loves of the wretched, who function as a signal warning to the character.

Upon Mount Purgatory, Beatrice's visceral demonstration of the cause and effect of various loves continues to affect Dante as he witnesses the work of penance on men's souls. Climbing, he encounters shades who only in death have come to know the deficiencies of love and character they demonstrated in life. In Canto XIII, he meets the repentant arrogant and envious, who with sutured eyes sing the blessedness of the merciful ones. As they suffer, they learn the augmenting nature of love, that increases for its spending (64). The gluttons in Purgatory likewise learn the blessedness of those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness," who chant as they walk, "*Labia mea Domine*" (247). "Open thou my lips," they (who have discovered a better use for their mouths) pray from Psalm 51:15, "and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise." Unlike Hell's shades, who die eternally in the unquenchable flames of conscience, Purgatory's contrite shades are purified in the flames of self-knowledge. As Dante walks the path they too must tread, he begins his own journey toward purgative self-knowledge. The journey begins in Canto IX when Dante gazes into the first of the three steps that lead to the gate of Purgatory and sees himself mirrored therein. "We then came on, and the first step was white marble so polished and clear that I mirrored myself in it in my true likeness..." (56). Here Dante begins to see himself as he really is. Dante realizes on the three steps that he, too, is deficient in love. He knows himself to be, in theory, like the suffering shades that surround him, a sinner. Thus Beatrice's dramatic demonstration begins Dante's startling self-revelation.

Having shown Dante the end of perverse loves and the healing power of self-knowledge, Beatrice continues her mediating work through confrontation and argumentation. On the top of Mount Purgatory, in the historic Eden from which the first man Adam was barred, glorious Beatrice confronts Dante with his personal sins and leads him to verbal acknowledgement, confession, and repentance. In this way Dante learns the benefit of self-sacrificial love and experiences a climactic personal transformation. Addressing the protagonist, Beatrice speaks: "O you who are on that side of the sacred river," she began again, turning against me the point of her speech, which even with the edge had seemed sharp to me;... 'Say, say, if this is true; to such an accusation your confession must be joined" (85). Initially harsh and unyielding, Beatrice spares no feelings in her rehearsal of the baser details of Dante's sin, infidelity to her memory and pursuit of worldly lusts (84). Having related the weak and fleshly love of Dante, who after her departure from earth pursued other, lesser loves, the scorned Beatrice, representative of a scorned God, now demands his full confession:

Within your desires of me that were leading you to love that Good beyond which there is nothing to which man may aspire, what pits did you find athwart your path, or what chains, that you had thus to strip you of the hope of passing onward? And what attractions or what advantages were displayed on the brow of others, that you were obliged to dally before them? (85)

Beatrice's confrontation provokes Dante to weep and to own his wrongs. He admits, "[t]he present things, with their false pleasure, turned my steps aside, as soon as your countenance was hidden" (85). Expanding on her grievance by explaining its gravity, Beatrice prods the *persona* Dante's conscience. Her effective words leave him contrite. "As children stand ashamed and dumb, with eyes on the ground, listening conscience-stricken and repentant, so stood I" (85). Dante confesses his sins and repents in true contrition. Then, in the midst of his self-knowledge, raising his eyes, Dante discovers his lover, tears passed, staring into the face of a griffin, mythical symbol of "the animal that is one person in two natures" (85), the God-Man Christ. Overcome with grief, Dante swoons, awaking to baptism in the River Lethe, where Matilda, agent of grace, cleanses him of his sins. Having failed in his suit as a courtly lover, Dante experiences the full force of his infidelity to the memory

of Beatrice. Acknowledging the truthfulness of her words and the righteousness of her anger, he is led to acknowledge his sin and repent. In this way, Beatrice, object of Dante's courtly love, mediates Dante's repentance and baptism.

However, this is only the beginning of the spiritual goodness and grace the blessed Beatrice mediates to Dante on Mount Purgatory. For it is through Beatrice's eyes that Dante first experiences the love of God. Returning the newly baptised Dante to Beatrice's side, the personified Virtues, her handmaidens, encourage him to seek her face. "See that you spare not your gaze,' they said,' we have placed you before the emeralds from which Love once shot his darts at you'" (86). Interestingly enough, even this statement betrays the nature of the chivalric love experience. With this allusion, the author suggests that the very love that beset Dante when he first met Beatrice was of God. God is the Love which once shot its darts through the eyes of Beatrice. She has ever, always been merely a divine vessel, a figure of God's deep and abiding love. Now Beatrice herself stands at the breast of the griffin (86), gazing into his eyes. As Dante's eyes meet Beatrice's, he sees reflected within them the love and mercy of Christ. "A thousand desires hotter than flame held my eyes on the shining eyes that remained ever fixed on the griffin. As the sun in a mirror, so was the twofold animal gleaming therewithin, now with the one, now with the other bearing" (86). As the Virtues enjoin Beatrice to turn her eyes upon him whom they now call her "faithful one" (86), Dante experiences fullness of grace. As Beatrice smiles at Dante, his thirst for forgiveness and reconciliation is satisfied. He has received a new name, "faithful" (86). His failures have been forgotten. He is accepted. At that moment, he is at peace with God and man. Self-awareness, full confession, baptism, and mediated forgiveness have righted his wrong loves and restored him to both God and Beatrice.

In all of these matters, Beatrice acts as a mediator of grace. Both her active work to restore Dante to his senses and her physical presence with him in Eden evidence this, since Dante deserved neither. He failed to cherish her memory and her earthly example to forsake the world for heaven's lasting pleasures. He has proven himself wholly undeserving of her patient patronage. However, even in the midst of his failure, she has sought him out, in this way embodying unmerited grace.

In order to be certain Dante understands the theological significance of his experience, Beatrice draws him into a dramatic Corpus Christi processional led by the griffin, a symbolic enactment of Christ's climactic work by which he redeemed the reason of man once lost at the fatal tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Beatrice explains that the effect of Christ's work is to enable the will to freely choose proper love. In Canto V of *Paradiso*, Beatrice notes, "the greatest gift which God in His bounty bestowed in creating, the most conformed to His own goodness and that which He most prizes, was the freedom of the will..." (95). Beatrice explains that when man offers his will freely to God, "this treasure becomes the sacrifice" (95). Christ's sacrificial act seats man in the position to ennoble himself again, to raise himself from depravity by an act of reasonable choice. The cross, according to Dante's Beatrice, doesn't restore man to God, but to dignity. By it, man is enabled to participate in his own salvation and partner with God in the work of redemption. Beatrice urges Dante to apply this reason, the gift of God, to better his own soul.

Even Beatrice's description of Christ's work at the cross echoes the author Dante's courtly love ideal. Just as Beatrice (a type of the sacrament or mediator of grace) draws Dante to herself through the love relationship they share, so the author suggests God draws His beloved to Himself through His ultimate act of love, His death on the cross. It is important to note here that man's response to God is no more necessitated by God's love in Dante's schema than was the character Dante's response to Beatrice. Christ's redemptive work does not complete the work of redemption in man, but merely ennobles him, restoring reason to her proper seat in man's drama (99). Man himself, led by reason, is left to choose whether he will respond to such love divine by submitting himself to such an

all-loving, only-wise benefactor. In this way, Christ Himself becomes a chivalric lover. His love, intensely spiritual in nature rather than fleshly, gives of itself, asking nothing in return. Often spurned, He loves passionately, intensely, all of His noble deeds done to benefit His beloved. It is clear that Christ is the archetypical chivalric lover who patronizes His lady, His Bride the Church, all of His efforts bent on ennobling her through His daunting deeds and activities. Both Beatrice's explanation and the *persona* Dante's experience suggest that even the cross affirms the beneficial work of chivalric love on the soul of man.

In *Paradiso*, Beatrice introduces Dante to the blessed souls of the elect who, by submitting their wills to God, live in perfect peace with Him, their neighbors, and themselves: "Brother, the power of love so quiets our will and makes us wish only for that which we have and gives us no other thirst. ...His will is our peace" (93). Dante witnesses the confluence of peace and desire in these saints. Depositing themselves and enthroning God in the kingdom of self by an act of their wills, these believers achieve personal fulfillment and rest. Once more, Dante is encouraged by another saint in Canto XXII who explains that in the last sphere of Heaven, "your high desire shall be fulfilled... where are fulfilled all others and my own. There every desire is perfect, mature, and whole" (118). This saint suggests that a man finds his desires matured and satisfied as he submits to God. Finally, in Canto XXV, Dante encounters the apostle John, who questions Dante's understanding of love. Here is the moment of truth, when all of Beatrice's efforts to mediate Dante's salvation and right his unreasonable loves are tried. Dante proves a brilliant student in his profound and provocative recitation of proper love. He testifies, "The good which satisfies this Court is Alpha and Omega of all the scripture which Love reads to me, either low or loud" (123). In listing the several influences that have guided him towards knowledge and understanding of God, Dante testifies:

"All those things whose bite can make the heart turn to God have wrought together in my love; for the being of the world and my own being, the death that He sustained that I might live, and that which every believer hopes as do I, with the living assurance of which I spoke, have drawn me from the sea of perverse love and placed me on the shore of right love. The leaves where-with all the garden of the Eternal Gardener is enleaved I love in measure of the good borne unto them from Him. (124)

By his own confession, Dante has learned to love rightly. He has learned to love the creation in light of the Creator, the gift in light of the Giver. Love's proper hierarchy restored, Dante now esteems the Giver as better than the gift. Freed from perverse loves by the effective plans of Beatrice, Dante now desires to love what God loves.

Moreover, Dante credits this spiritual change to Beatrice. Having entered the Empyrean, he follows Beatrice into the presence of the triune God, whose glory subsumes even her fair radiance. Dazzled by the light, Dante looks for Beatrice, but finds another at his side. Questioning this elder, he speaks: "Where is she?" I said at once; whereon he, 'To terminate your desire Beatrice urged me from my place; and if you look up to the circle which is third from the highest tier, you will see her again, in the throne her merits have allotted to her'" (130). Since Beatrice has completed her work of awakening Dante to the spirit and of leading him to reasonable love, she abandons her place of preeminence in his life. She yields to One more worthy of the adulation of her most devout and worshipful subject. This is her last act of mediation. She returns to her proper seat among the elect worshipers, willing Dante to join in their praise. Dante, seeing her there, pronounces a benediction:

O lady, in whom my hope is strong, and who for my salvation did endure to leave in Hell your footprints, of all those things which I have seen acknowledge the grace and the virtue to be from your power and your excellence. It is you who have drawn me from bondage into liberty

by all those paths, by all those means by which you had the power so to do. Preserve in me your great munificence so that my soul, which you have made whole, may be loosed from the body, pleasing unto you. (130)

Dante credits Beatrice with effecting his reformation, restoring his reason, and leading him to God. A true chivalric lover, he accords honor to his lady for the benefits his spirit has attained in loving her. Not only has his love drawn him to changed conduct and behavior, it has transformed his spiritual condition. In loving Beatrice, Dante has been drawn to love God. This is Dante's theology of Chivalric Love.

While it is evident that the *persona* Dante's epic supernatural journey has produced permanent changes in his understanding and conduct, such changes prove the least of the fruits of his experience. More importantly, these alterations indicate a deeper change in his spiritual condition. Dante's knowledge of God, his confidence in grace, and his quiet submission of will have produced a proper hierarchy of all his earthly loves. This hierarchy has delivered Dante from the tyranny of the idols he once worshiped. In this way, Dante's previous idols, things which once stalked him as beasts (1), are tamed and transformed into their proper selves. The author brings all of these changes about through the chivalric love relationship of his two main characters, suggesting the power of courtly love to ameliorate both character and soul, even leading the participant to God. While it is true that the medieval ideal of chivalric love can occasion evil in man, as the *Inferno* indicates, the greater and more profound testimony of Dante's *Comedy* suggests that, at its best, chivalric love exerts powerful force for man's salvation.

By casting the character Beatrice as divine mediator, the author baptizes the physical love of man and assigns it grave importance in man's quest for eternal life. Dante's *Comedy* is truly a love story in three acts. As the curtain falls on the lovers, it's clear that Beatrice has, by the "bite" of chivalric love, worked together with the Divine death to draw Dante from "the sea of perverse loves" and to place him on right love's safe shore (124). Dante, by his earnest devotion to and love for Beatrice, has come to know a love that is deeper still. By virtue of Dante's chivalric love affair with Beatrice, all of his earthly loves are ordered and turn harmoniously with "the Love which moves the sun and the other stars" (133). Through his *Divine Comedy*, the author Dante pays epic tribute to his own chivalric love affair with the true lady Beatrice, making her the heroine of his own divine love story. In this way, he valorously ensures the lasting glory of his lady fair and brings a new radiant nobility and significance to the chivalric love ideal.

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