

# Inferno

Cantos I, III, V, & XXXIV



from

The Divine Comedy

by

Dante Alighieri

(1265-1321)

# DANTE ALIGHIERI



## 1265–1321

Dante Alighieri (dän' tā al əg yer' ē), whose visions of Hell have haunted centuries of people since the Middle Ages, was born in Florence, Italy, in May of 1265. Dante's Florence was a place of political turbulence, divided between two rival political factions, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The Ghibellines favored the primacy of the Holy Roman emperor in Italian politics, while the Guelphs supported the Roman pontiff. Even after the Ghibellines were expelled from Florence, the Guelphs could not unify the city-state and were themselves divided into two parties, the White (supporting the empire) and the Black (supporting the papacy).

Dante was born into a well-to-do merchant family. Although his father, Alighiero di Bellincione (al əg yer' ō də bel lēn çō' nə), was only moderately involved in Florentine politics and remained relatively unscathed by the political troubles, the same cannot be said of Dante.

Dante was probably educated at the University of Bologna, where he studied law and rhetoric. Not only was Bologna Europe's most presti-

gious center of legal and rhetorical training, but it was also a city with a great poetical tradition. It was here that Dante came in contact with a new school of poets who sought to free poetry from its old confines of church and court. As a result, he produced a great number of lyric poems and formulated a poetic language that would culminate in the *Divine Comedy*.

Soon, however, Dante became embroiled in the political controversies of his time. He fought against the Ghibellines from Arezzo in the Battle of Campaldino in 1289. In 1295 he became an official in the Florentine commune. Dante belonged to the White faction of the Guelphs at a time when the pope, Boniface VIII, had decided to support the Blacks. The Black Guelphs, aided by the pope and the French, came to power in Florence and in 1302 Dante found himself exiled from his beloved home, never to return. Although he attempted through letters and treatises to regain some influence on papal and Italian politics, these were to no avail. Dante died in Ravenna in northern Italy in 1321.

Finished only shortly before his death, the *Divine Comedy* was the poetic journey of a man struggling to reconcile himself to a bitter political exile through the triumph of love. Guiding him on his pilgrimage for temporal and spiritual salvation was his beloved Beatrice. Dante may have seen the model for his ideal guide, Beatrice Portinari, only twice in his life, when he was nine years old and then again nine years later. Nonetheless, Beatrice, whose name means "she who blesses," became for Dante the force that led him out of his despair and into spiritual renewal. She was first the subject of most of his love poetry, but his quest for happiness in this secular role did not suffice. She became the object of his religious quest and the symbol of spiritual purity that he met at the top of the mountain of Purgatory. Such idealization of Beatrice linked her to the Virgin Mary, herself the object of cultlike adoration in the Middle Ages.



# BACKGROUND

## THE DIVINE COMEDY

The *Inferno* is the first of three parts of the *Divine Comedy*. Dante's journey begins on Good Friday, the commemoration of Christ's Crucifixion, and ends on the vigil of Easter Sunday, the celebration of Christ's Resurrection. The *Divine Comedy* thus takes the reader on a journey that symbolically begins in a despairing world not yet redeemed by Christ's Crucifixion and ends with the poet's return as a man, renewed in hope, having beheld the beatific vision of divine grace.

Central to Dante's conception and execution of all his work is his preoccupation with the number three, inspired by the Christian concept of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost united in one trinity. Not only is the *Divine Comedy* the last in a poetic trilogy but it is itself composed of three parts. Each part is composed of thirty-three cantos if we exclude the first canto of the *Inferno*, which is the only canto that takes place on Earth. Within each canto, the verse form the poet uses is called *terza rima*, which is composed of three lines. Thus from one of the smallest poetical units, the verse, to the larger project of the *Divine Comedy* and its ultimate place in the Dantean corpus, the number three is crucial.

In fact, the spiritual quest of the *Divine Comedy* takes place over the space of three days. On Good Friday, Dante finds himself lost and directionless in a dark forest. Abandoned by hope and in despair, he undertakes his quest for belonging and ultimate salvation. He is led through Hell by Virgil, who is sent down by Beatrice to guide her admirer through his spiritual journey. Virgil, perhaps the Latin poet most widely read in the Middle Ages, has special significance as a pre-Christian prophet

because of his fourth Eclogue, in which he discusses the birth of a potential savior of the Roman people. Medieval people, obsessed with relating the pagan past to the present Christian experience, were constantly justifying reading ancient literature by means of such interpretations.

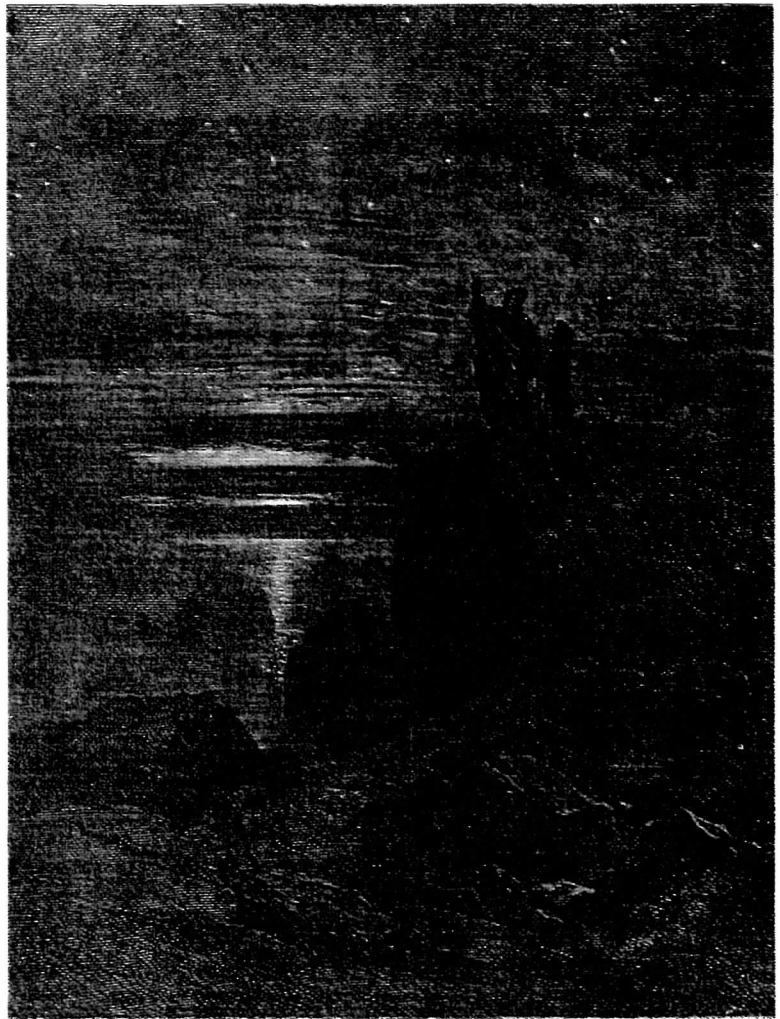
The various sinners with whom Dante meets and the punishments they suffer serve as warnings to him to change his life for the better. The images and events depicted in the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso*, the last two sections of the *Comedy*, reinforce the lessons of the *Inferno*.

### The Circles of Hell

Hell is organized according to the gravity of the sin involved. In this work, however, there is a tension between the theological classification of sin and Dante's personal agenda. The farther Dante descends into the pit, the more serious the crimes committed by the people who surround him. Sometimes these crimes have been committed against God, the Church, and other people; but each of Dante's enemies finds his or her own special place in Hell. In this way Dante avenges himself on those responsible for his exile. It is ultimately his pen that condemns them to their eternal literary damnation.

The virtuous pagans, whom Dante admires but who do not know about Christ, rest peacefully in Limbo, a place without pain or hope where medieval thinking places the souls of unbaptized children and righteous people who lived before Christ's birth. They are closely followed by the lustful, the gluttonous, the avaricious, the prodigal, and the

wrathful. These relatively harmless sinners are separated from the heretics by the forbidding Wall of Dis. Even further isolated by the bloody river of Phlegethon are the violent, murderers, suicides, and blasphemers. Dante and Virgil must be carried down a steep precipice by the monster Geryon to the Malebolge, the realm of the fraudulent. Here the most hated of Dante's enemies, such as Boniface VIII, are tormented. But the lowest circle of Hell is reserved for traitors. For Dante, Lucifer, frozen into the lowest depths, is the ultimate traitor. It is easy to see why Dante finds in the demon's mouth Brutus and Cassius, who betrayed Caesar, and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus Christ.



## Purgatory

Virgil carries Dante down through the bottom of Hell and then up toward the mountain of *Purgatorio*. The organization of Purgatory, with its movement toward redemption, is the mirror image of Hell. Not surprisingly, none of Dante's enemies are to be found in this realm of hope. Traitors thus begin their long climb toward Paradise at the bottom of the mountain. They are preceded by the envious, the wrathful, and the other lesser sinners. At the top of the mountain, and at the verge of salvation, Dante finds the lustful, confused by their pursuit of physical rather than spiritual love. His contemplation of love preambles his encounter with Beatrice, the personification of perfect love. At this point, Virgil can go no farther and Beatrice must become Dante's guide.

## Paradise

As Dante has confronted the wages of sin in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, so he contemplates the rewards of love in the *Paradiso*. It is love that ultimately saves humankind and enables Dante to gaze upon the mystical rose. Saints, angels, the Virgin Mary, and God all reside in that vision. Having seen all that without being able to describe its inexpressible beauty, Dante returns to his earthly life, renewed in his quest for ultimate redemption.

## The Vernacular

Dante broke with tradition by writing in the Italian vernacular. By not writing his masterpiece in Latin, he made it available not only to the learned but to anyone who read Italian.

from the **Inferno**

Dante Alighieri

translated by John Ciardi

## Canto I

### The Dark Wood of Error

Midway in his allotted threescore years and ten, Dante comes to himself with a start and realizes that he has strayed from the True Way into the Dark Wood of Error (Worldliness). As soon as he has realized his loss, Dante lifts his eyes and sees the first light of the sunrise (the Sun is the Symbol of Divine Illumination) lighting the shoulders of a little hill (The Mount of Joy). It is the Easter Season, the time of resurrection, and the sun is in its equinoctial rebirth.<sup>1</sup> This juxtaposition of joyous symbols fills Dante with hope and he sets out at once to climb directly up the Mount of Joy, but almost immediately his way is blocked by the Three Beasts of Worldliness: THE LEOPARD OF MALICE AND FRAUD, THE LION OF VIOLENCE AND AMBITION, and THE SHE-WOLF OF INCONTINENCE.<sup>2</sup> These beasts, and especially the She-Wolf, drive him back despairing into the darkness of error. But just as all seems lost, a figure appears to him. It is the shade of VIRGIL,<sup>3</sup> Dante's symbol of HUMAN REASON.

Virgil explains that he has been sent to lead Dante from error. There can, however, be no direct

ascent past the beasts: the man who would escape them must go a longer and harder way. First he must descend through Hell (The Recognition of Sin), then he must ascend through Purgatory (The Renunciation of Sin), and only then may he reach the pinnacle of joy and come to the Light of God. Virgil offers to guide Dante, but only as far as Human Reason can go. Another guide (BEATRICE, symbol of DIVINE LOVE) must take over for the final ascent, for Human Reason is self-limited. Dante submits himself joyously to Virgil's guidance and they move off.

Midway in our life's journey,<sup>4</sup> I went astray  
from the straight road and woke to find myself  
alone in a dark wood. How shall I say

what wood that was! I never saw so drear,  
5 so rank, so arduous<sup>5</sup> a wilderness!  
Its very memory gives a shape to fear.

Death could scarce be more bitter than that place!  
But since it came to good, I will recount  
all that I found revealed there by God's grace.

10 How I came to it I cannot rightly say,  
so drugged and loose with sleep had I become  
when I first wandered there from the True Way.

Note: Footnotes adapted from text by John Ciardi.

1. **equinoctial rebirth:** After the vernal equinox, which occurs about March 21, days become longer than nights.
2. **INCONTINENCE:** Lack of self-restraint, especially with regard to sexual activity.
3. **Virgil** (vɜr' jəl): A great Roman poet (70–19 B.C.).

4. **Midway in our life's journey:** The Biblical life span is threescore years and ten—seventy years. The action opens in Dante's thirty-fifth year, i.e., A.D. 1300.

5. **so rank, so arduous:** So overgrown, so difficult to cross.

But at the far end of that valley of evil  
whose maze had sapped my very heart with fear!  
15 I found myself before a little hill

and lifted up my eyes. Its shoulders glowed  
already with the sweet rays of that planet<sup>6</sup>  
whose virtue leads men straight on every road,

and the shining strengthened me against the fright  
20 whose agony had wracked the lake of my heart  
through all the terrors of that piteous night.

Just as a swimmer, who with his last breath  
flounders ashore from perilous seas, might turn  
to memorize the wide water of his death—

25 so did I turn, my soul still fugitive  
from death's surviving image, to stare down  
that pass that none had ever left alive.

And there I lay to rest from my heart's race  
till calm and breath returned to me. Then rose  
30 and pushed up that dead slope at such a pace

each footfall rose above the last.<sup>7</sup> And lo!  
almost at the beginning of the rise  
I faced a spotted Leopard,<sup>8</sup> all tremor and flow  
and gaudy pelt. And it would not pass, but stood  
35 so blocking my every turn that time and again  
I was on the verge of turning back to the wood.

6. **that planet:** The sun. Medieval astronomers considered it a planet. It is also symbolic of God as He who lights man's way.

7. **each footfall . . . last:** The literal rendering would be: "So that the fixed foot was ever the lower." "Fixed" has often been translated "right" and an ingenious reasoning can support that reading, but a simpler explanation offers itself and seems more competent: Dante is saying that he climbed with such zeal and haste that every footfall carried him above the last despite the steepness of the climb. At a slow pace, on the other hand, the rear foot might be brought up only as far as the forward foot. This device of selecting a minute but exactly centered detail to convey the whole of a larger action is one of the central characteristics of Dante's style.

8. **a spotted Leopard:** The three beasts that Dante encounters undoubtedly are taken from the Bible, Jeremiah 5:6. Many additional and incidental interpretations have been advanced for them, but the central interpretation must remain as noted. They foreshadow the three divisions of Hell (incontinence, violence, and fraud) which Virgil explains at length in Canto XI, 16–111.

This fell at the first widening of the dawn  
as the sun was climbing Aries with those stars  
that rode with him to light the new creation.<sup>9</sup>

40 Thus the holy hour and the sweet season  
of commemoration did much to arm my fear  
of that bright murderous beast with their good  
omen.

Yet not so much but what I shook with dread  
at sight of a great Lion that broke upon me  
45 raging with hunger, its enormous head

held high as if to strike a mortal terror  
into the very air. And down his track,  
a She-Wolf drove upon me, a starved horror

ravening and wasted beyond all belief.

50 She seemed a rack for avarice,<sup>10</sup> gaunt and  
craving.

Oh many the souls she has brought to endless  
grief!

She brought such heaviness upon my spirit  
at sight of her savagery and desperation,  
I died from every hope of that high summit.

55 And like a miser—eager in acquisition  
but desperate in self-reproach when Fortune's  
wheel  
turns to the hour of his loss—all tears and  
attrition<sup>11</sup>

I wavered back; and still the beast pursued,  
forcing herself against me bit by bit  
60 till I slid back into the sunless wood.

9. **Aries . . . new creation:** The medieval tradition had it that the sun was in the zodiacal sign of Aries at the time of the Creation. The significance of the astronomical and religious conjunction is an important part of Dante's intended allegory. It is just before dawn of Good Friday A.D. 1300 when he awakens in the Dark Wood. Thus his new life begins under Aries, the sign of creation, at dawn (rebirth) and in the Easter Season (which commemorates the resurrection of Jesus). Moreover the moon is full and the sun is in the equinox, conditions that did not fall together on any Friday of 1300. Dante is obviously constructing poetically the perfect Easter as a symbol of his new awakening.

10. **a rack for avarice:** An instrument of torture for greed.

11. **attrition:** Weakening; wearing away.

And as I fell to my soul's ruin, a presence  
gathered before me on the discolored air,  
the figure of one who seemed hoarse from long  
silence.

At sight of him in that friendless waste I cried:  
65 "Have pity on me, whatever thing you are,  
whether shade or living man." And it replied:

"Not man, though man I once was, and my  
blood  
was Lombard, both my parents Mantuan.<sup>12</sup>  
I was born, though late, *sub Julio*,<sup>13</sup> and bred

70 in Rome under Augustus in the noon  
of the false and lying gods.<sup>14</sup> I was a poet  
and sang of old Anchises' noble son

who came to Rome after the burning of Troy.<sup>15</sup>  
But you—why do *you* return to these distresses  
75 instead of climbing that shining Mount of Joy

which is the seat and first cause of man's bliss?"  
"And are you then that Virgil and that fountain  
of purest speech?" My voice grew tremulous:

80 "Glory and light of poets! now may that zeal  
and love's apprenticeship that I poured out  
on your heroic verses serve me well!

For you are my true master and first author,  
the sole maker from whom I drew the breath  
of that sweet style whose measures have brought  
me honor.

85 See there, immortal sage, the beast I flee.  
For my soul's salvation, I beg you, guard me  
from her,  
for she has struck a mortal tremor through me."

And he replied, seeing my soul in tears:  
"He must go by another way who would escape  
90 this wilderness, for that mad beast that fleers<sup>16</sup>

before you there, suffers no man to pass.  
She tracks down all, kills all, and knows no glut,  
but, feeding, she grows hungrier than she was.

She mates with any beast, and will mate with more  
95 before the Greyhound comes to hunt her down.  
He will not feed on lands nor loot, but honor

and love and wisdom will make straight his way.  
He will rise between Feltro and Feltro,<sup>17</sup> and in  
him  
shall be the resurrection and new day

100 of that sad Italy for which Nisus died,  
and Turnus, and Euryalus, and the maid  
Camilla.<sup>18</sup>  
He shall hunt her through every nation of sick  
pride

till she is driven back forever to Hell  
whence Envy first released her on the world.  
105 Therefore, for your own good, I think it well

you follow me and I will be your guide  
and lead you forth through an eternal place.  
There you shall see the ancient spirits tried

12. **Lombard . . . Mantuan:** Lombardy is a region of northern Italy; Mantua, the birthplace of Virgil, is a city in that region.

13. **sub Julio:** In the reign of Julius Caesar. It would be more accurate to say that he was born during the lifetime of Caesar (102?–44 B.C.). Augustus did not begin his rule as dictator until long after Virgil's birth, which occurred in 70 B.C.

14. **under Augustus . . . lying gods:** Augustus, the grand-nephew of Julius Caesar, was the emperor of Rome from 27 B.C. to A.D. 14. The "lying gods" are the false gods of classical mythology.

15. **and sang . . . Troy:** Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*, describes the destruction of Troy by the Greeks and the founding of Roman civilization by the Trojan Aeneas, son of Anchises (an *kī' sēz'*).

16. **fleers** (flirz): Laughs scornfully.

17. **the Greyhound . . . Feltro and Feltro:** The Greyhound almost certainly refers to Can Grande della Scala (1290–1329), a great Italian leader born in Verona, which lies between the towns of Feltre and Montefeltro.

18. **Nisus . . . Camilla:** All were killed in the war between the Trojans and the Latians when, according to legend, Aeneas led the survivors of Troy into Italy. Nisus and Euryalus (*Aeneid* IX) were Trojan comrades-in-arms who died together. Camilla (*Aeneid* XI) was the daughter of the Latian king and one of the warrior women. She was killed in a horse charge against the Trojans after displaying great gallantry. Turnus (*Aeneid* XII) was killed by Aeneas in a duel.

in endless pain, and hear their lamentation  
110 as each bemoans the second death<sup>19</sup> of souls.  
Next you shall see upon a burning mountain<sup>20</sup>

souls in fire and yet content in fire,  
knowing that whensoever it may be  
they yet will mount into the blessed choir.

115 To which, if it is still your wish to climb,  
a worthier spirit<sup>21</sup> shall be sent to guide you.  
With her shall I leave you, for the King of Time,

who reigns on high, forbids me to come there<sup>22</sup>  
since, living, I rebelled against his law.  
120 He rules the waters and the land and air

**19. the second death:** Damnation. "This is the second death, even the lake of fire." (the Bible, Revelation 20:14)

**20. a burning mountain:** The Mountain of Purgatory, described in the second book of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

**21. a worthier spirit:** Beatrice.

**22. forbids me to come there:** Salvation is only through Christ in Dante's theology. Virgil lived and died before the establishment of Christ's teachings in Rome and cannot therefore enter Heaven.

and there holds court, his city and his throne.  
Oh blessed are they he chooses!" And I to him:  
"Poet, by that God to you unknown,

lead me this way. Beyond this present ill  
125 and worse to dread, lead me to Peter's gate<sup>23</sup>  
and be my guide through the sad halls of Hell."

And he then: "Follow." And he moved ahead in  
silence, and I followed where he led.

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**23. Peter's gate:** The gate of Purgatory. (See *Purgatorio* IX, 76ff.) The gate is guarded by an angel with a gleaming sword. The angel is Peter's vicar (Peter, the first pope, symbolized all popes; i.e., Christ's vicar on earth) and is entrusted with the two great keys.

Some commentators argue that this is the gate of Paradise, but Dante mentions no gate beyond this one in his ascent to Heaven. It should be remembered, too, that those who pass the gate of Purgatory have effectively entered Heaven.

The three gates that figure in the entire journey are the gate of Hell (Canto III, 1–11), the gate of Dis (Canto VIII, 79–113, and Canto IX, 86–87), and the gate of Purgatory, as above.

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**Reader's Response** *If you were Dante, what emotions would you be feeling now? Explain.*

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## THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

### Clarifying

1. Describe the appearance of the three animals.
2. (a) How is Virgil described? (b) Why does Dante describe him in this way?

### Interpreting

3. Why is it appropriate that Virgil is Dante's guide?
4. (a) Explain the significance of the straight road. (b) Of the dark wood.

5. What does his attempt to climb the hill represent, and why is he confronted by the beasts?
6. What does the prediction about the she-wolf and the hound tell you about Dante's purpose in writing the *Inferno*? Is he more concerned with spiritual matters or with temporal problems such as politics? (b) How does he manage to put the two together?
7. (a) In what ways does Dante represent a person living in Florence in the late thirteenth century? (b) In what ways does he represent all people?



## Applying

8. Assuming that you were undertaking a journey such as Dante's, whom would you choose as your guide and why? Would you choose a literary figure, a political figure, or some other prominent person? Explain your choice and in doing so tell why there would be special advantages that stemmed from your decision.

## ANALYZING LITERATURE

### Interpreting Allegory

In an allegory the characters, the setting, and the plot all have a symbolic meaning as well as a literal one. Three animals pose obstacles for Dante in this canto: the leopard, the lion, and the she-wolf. These animals are real threats, but they also represent abstract ideas. For example, there is an old story about the leopard changing his coat (adding spots) in order to trick the other animals. Therefore it is easy to see how Dante can construct an allegory of fraud and deceit using the leopard. How might the other animals fit into Dante's allegorical structure? Which beasts would be natural choices?

1. (a) What do people normally say about lions? (b) What do you think the lion in this canto might represent?
2. (a) Why does Dante describe the wolf as the most threatening of the three animals? (b) What or who, then, might the greyhound represent, and why would it be appropriate for him to chase the wolf from Italy?

## THINKING AND WRITING

### Composing an Allegory

Think about a strong emotion you have felt at some point in your life. This emotion could be love, anger, sadness, or disgust. Could you associate an animal or an object with this emotion? A singing bird could represent happiness, for example. A soft bed might represent comfort. In what way would you describe the animal or object in order to convey all the important aspects of this feeling? Write a brief essay in which you convey your emotion through the description of the object or animal. As you revise your work, think as the reader would. Is your allegory clear without being too obvious? Your reader should still have to guess at the meaning of your description.

## COMMENTARY

### Tracing Influences

Dante is basing his *Divine Comedy* in part on classical epics, particularly Virgil's *Aeneid*, which tells the story of the founding of Rome. Aeneas, the epic hero, flees Troy and wanders throughout the Mediterranean region in his quest for a new land. In Book VI of the *Aeneid*, Virgil describes Aeneas's descent into Hades, which is divided into the Elysian Fields, where the souls of good men and women wander, and the realm of punishment, where the souls of the wicked suffer. Aeneas is guided by the Cumaean Sybil and protected by a

golden bough as he makes the arduous journey of self-discovery. The importance of this episode for Dante's work is hinted at by the numerous details the later poet transposes from the classical epic. The boatman of Hades, Charon, is found again in Dante's Hell. Dante finds himself in places, like Cocytus, that originated in the classical Hades. But Dante replaces pagan ceremonies and creeds with his own religious beliefs. Virgil can explain the images of horror to Dante and protect him from danger, but he cannot place the meaning of these visions in the larger context of Christianity. Dante must do this for himself.

# GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

## *from the Inferno, Canto I*

### Commentary

**Allegory.** An **allegory** (al' ə gô' ē) is the discussion of one subject by disguising it as another, which resembles the first in some striking way. In an allegory the characters, the setting, and the plot have a hidden or symbolic meaning beyond their literal meaning. For example, rather than speaking directly of school, a disgruntled student might discuss it as a prison in which he does time. The principal becomes a warden, teachers become guards, the classroom a cell, a weekend becomes a furlough, and summer ultimately a three-month parole. All of these images together comprise the allegory of school as a prison.

An allegory teaches a moral lesson. Especially in medieval literature, allegory is the use of visible, physical reality to explain or express the invisible or intangible. Allegories can be read on two levels—the literal and the symbolic. It can be argued that the gods of the Greek Pantheon form an allegory of nature, with each god representing a different natural force or phenomenon. Poseidon represents the sea, Zeus the sky, Hades the earth. Apollo is the sun. Demeter and Dionysius represent the food and drink necessary to human survival. Their capricious behavior toward the human race resembles the arbitrary violence and benevolence of nature.

### Writing

Describe someone who has helped you solve a difficult problem or series of problems in your life. How did that person help you? What did he or she do?

### Primary Source

George Holmes, a literary historian, points out the source of Dante's masterpiece: "The model that gave Dante the idea of the *Inferno* was Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI . . . Virgil's underworld has many resemblances to Dante's Hell. . . . There is a general parallelism, not only in the physical arrangements and in many poetic details, but in the general idea of Hell as a place where punishment can be observed and also where shades of the friendly dead can be interrogated about their fate. The inspiration for the *Inferno*, and very likely the inspiration for the whole *Comedy*, arose out of Dante's enthusiasm for Virgil."