

THE STRUCTURE AND RHYME SCHEME OF THE DIVINE COMEDY

Dante builds a “cathedral of words.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Example:

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

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

DANTE'S PERSONAL SUMMARY

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

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

Comprehension Questions

1. What is an allegory? _____

2. How is Dante's allegory different from the standard type? _____

3. What is the difference between a personified abstraction and a symbolic personage? Give an example of each. _____

4. What is the main allegory of the *Divine Comedy*? _____

5. What two popular story types does Dante combine in this allegory? _____

6. Who were the Guelphs and the Ghibellines? _____

7. What was Dante's political affiliation, and what was the outcome of this affiliation?

8. What is the time frame/time of the year of the *Comedy*, and what is the probable significance of this timing? _____

9. What are the two kinds of symbols? Define them. _____

10. In your own words, state Dante's own description of the 1) *literal* and 2) *allegorical* meaning of the *Comedy*. _____

11. Pick two of the images from the "Major Symbolic Images" handout and explain how each fulfills the function of a natural symbol. (i.e., How can Dante easily use each in his allegory because of its natural characteristics?) _____

12. How does Dante use numbers to build a "cathedral of words"? _____

THE INFERNO – CANTOS I & II

Canto I

Line

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

Canto II

Line

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

Vocabulary

1. rank _____
2. arduous _____
3. avarice _____
4. attrition _____
5. presume _____

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the three beasts, and what does each symbolize? _____

2. Why must Dante go by “another way” (line 89)? Why can’t he ascend the Mount directly from the Dark Wood? _____

3. Why, in this obviously Christian work, does Dante invoke the Muses? _____

4. Who are the two others Dante mentions as going before him through Hell, and what is their significance? _____

5. What do the “three blessed Ladies” symbolize, and what is their role in Dante’s journey? _____

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