Canto 1 Notes & Analysis

Characters:

* Dante: 35 years old, pompous man, who is not religious enough and therefore the story is about his journey to find Christ through visiting the levels of Hell, purgatory, and Heaven.
* Virgil: Dante’s “guardian” or “teacher” who acts like a mentor to Dante taking him on his journey to God (Dante greatly respects Virgil’s skills as a poet, looks up to him)

Dark Wood of Error

* Halfway through Dante’s life he realizes he has strayed into worldliness
* Tries to climb the Mount of Joy (Easter Season)-blocked by three beasts, cowers in fear
* Virgil appears (Human Reason)
  + Sent to lead Dante from error
  + No direct ascent past beasts, they must go the long and hard way
    - Must descend through hell (recognition of sin)
    - Must go through purgatory (reconciliation of sin)
    - Virgil can only go as far as Human Reason can go (can’t go past purgatory)
    - Beatrice will take over for final ascent (Beatrice is believed to be real woman whom Dante was in love with, historians believe they only met twice in real life, symbolized Dante’s connection to Heaven as she is purity)

Literary Analysis #1 What detail in the opening lines immediately suggest the allegorical nature of the poem?

* There is literal meaning of Hell being a dark gloomy place and this is represented in the imagery of the story. But it becomes allegorical in the fact that Dante’s journey through Hell may be very “literal” but his conceptual journey is his search for God. And the surroundings he is in, represent a bigger idea than the literal Journey.
* On the surface, he is a man lost in a terrifying woods that is being chased by three beasts and blocked from climbing a hill.
* On the literal side, Dante has strayed from God’s path and thus is trapped in a realm of confusion. The three beasts represent his sins and are blocking his path to Heaven.
* Virgil literally describes the plan/ adventure of the story, but is also providing structure to Dante’s chaos.
* 3 lines:
  + Trinity
    - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
  + 3 stages of Human Life
    - Birth, Middle ages, Death
  + 3 layers of afterlife
    - Heaven, Hell, Purgatory

*Actual Poem*

* *Wakes up in dark and creepy forest*
* *Realizes death would be better than this place and that God’s grace revealed that to him*
* *Drugged by worldliness (can’t we relate this to our own lives today? Finds the Mountain of Joy- tries to climb it*
* *Faces a Leopard (Mentioned in Jeremiah 5:6)*
  + *Stands for Malice and Fraud*
  + *Blocks him*
* *Faces Lion*
  + *Stands for Violence and Ambition*
  + *Also blocks him*
* *Faces She-Wolf*
  + *Stands for incontinence*
    - *Lack of self restraint*
  + *Blocks him*
  + *Feels “heaviness on his spirit”*
  + *Lost hope*
* *Falls back into woods, Virgil appears and rescues him. Virgil lays out the entire plot to Dante.*

Lit Analysis #2 In what ways is Dante’s reaction to the beasts more realistic than heroic?

* He is driven back and does not defeat the beasts. Instead of being courageous he accepts fear from these beasts, therefore making this story not an epic. The beast represented fraud and fear, two negative sins, making his journey to God more prominent in the fact that he wants to return home and have the fear disappear. Dante realistically is being controlled by his own sins.

*Back to the poem*

* *Meets Virgil- becomes an avid fanboy*
  + *Asks him to guard him from the beasts*

Literary Analysis #3 Based on Virgil’s comments, do you think the She-Wolf symbolizes Dante’s social, political, religious, or moral concerns?

* Dante was kicked out of Florence
* He was trying to get back in
* The wolf was the last one to make sure he didn’t come back.
* The She-Wolf is Dante’s own sin that is blocking his ascent into Heaven.
  + Represents a political adversary
    - “Knows no glut” “kills all” “tracks down all”
      * Sounds political to me
    - “Grows hungrier when she feeds”
      * *Definitely* political… I mean, dictator much
    - Worst thing to be taken from her is honor
* Socially: He was put at a difficult position for the rankings of being a successful citizen in Florence he was facing the adversity of his passions, and the people around him showered him with judgement for his decisions therefore he was socially exiled, and banished from Florence.
* Politically: The She-Wolf was sort of the “last-man standing” in stopping him from completing his moral journey to the world and realizing his potential in the religious path.
* Religiously: He was confused about his religious path. He found that God’s path was not one he had chosen to follow instead he strayed and drew further and further away. He then decided that this journey through Hell was almost his way of reconnecting. The She-Wolf was one of the final obstacles in the fact of reconnecting with God.
* Morally: He felt as if by being kicked out of Florence, and not accepting God he was doing something morally wrong within his life. So completing this journey and overcoming obstacles allowed him to morally become one and except himself.
  + *Dante tells Virgil how he is practically his Idol*
  + *I would die for you, “my true master” (662)*
  + *Dante has to escape the beast, the she-wolf (she is the final obstacle)*
  + *Dante must survive without eating or stealing, must survive without the she wolf hurting him*
  + *Virgil agrees to be Dante’s guide to the hill of fire!*
* *Virgil tells him to go down instead of up*
* *Has to go through Hell*
  + *Second death-damnation*
  + *Burning Mountain- Mountain of Purgatory*
    - *People are joyful there because they know they will eventually go to heaven*
* *To climb beyond the mountain he will need assistance of Beatrice*
* *Follows Virgil to hell*

Literary Analysis #4

At the end of Canto I, Dante lays out the structure of his entire poem. In what way does this help the reader grasp the allegory?

At the end of the canto, Dante said exactly what was going to happen throughout the rest of the story. When one looks at this, they can instantly see how his progression through hell, purgatory and heaven directly translate to his life, similarly to how the dark wood represents how Dante strayed from his faith. When he ascends into purgatory and then “into the light of god,” this represents his enlightenment and how he needs to follow “the True Way” (659 Sterns). The story of the inferno on surface level is about a journey through hell, but symbolically it represents how Dante needs to be worse before he can be better, and due to this, he must spiral down the rings of hell, then ascend to Purgatory with Beatrice Portinari as his guide. Virgil is clearly portrayed as Dante’s Guide, but not only because he is physically leading Dante through various realms. By describing their journey, the poem provides a contrasting sense of structure to the emotional and mental turmoil Dante is currently facing.

Lines to Analyze:

Analyze lines 47-54 in Canto I.

“And down his track

A She-Wolf drove upon me, a starved horror

Ravening and wasted beyond all belief.

She seems a rack for avarice, 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” (*The Inferno* 47-54)

Analysis: The She-Wolf represents Dante’s inner suffering, particularly with the inability to connect with God. The she-wolf is “stuck” in this abyss of hell, and she cannot leave; her punishment represents the sin of inconsistency, where the other beasts represent fraud and violence. Dante’s fear of the She-Wolf is different than that of other characters in other pieces of literature as he was terrified of the She-Wolf, as shown in lines 47-54. Other characters like Aeneas from *The Aeneid* or Oedipus from *Oedipus* follow the characteristics of an epic hero, seeing as they come from an epic poem. They are god-like, strong, and portrayed as flawless, as most epics and literature from earlier purposes served as propaganda or glorification of the protagonist. Thus, these heroes face monsters and challenges head on. However, other characters, such as the Jinnee from *The Fisherman and the Jinnee,* do display flawed emotions. When the Jinnee first came out of the bottle he was terrified, thinking that it was an awful god coming to punish him. The jinnee was truly scared, just as Dante was when he saw the She-Wolf. Dante acts exactly like one might expect a real man to. He is absolutely terrified of the She-Wolf and his reaction seems very normal. Also, the entire story focuses on the importance of destroying one’s sins in order to align with God’s path. As the She-Wolf block’s Dante’s ascent into Heaven, it is the physical embodiment of his impurity and struggle to find God’s light once again.