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The *Divine Comedy* is composed of three sections—the *Inferno* , the*Purgatorio* , and the *Paradiso* . In the *Inferno* , the poet Virgil has been sent by Beatrice to lead Dante through Hell. Hell, a series of downward spiraling circles, is organized according to the gravity of the sin being punished. The lowest circle is reserved for traitors and Lucifer himself, the ultimate betrayer.

In Canto I of the *Inferno* , Dante first awakens to his plight and meets his guide. In Canto III, Virgil leads Dante through the Gate and into Hell itself.

**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.**1**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.* **2**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,* **3**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,**4**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,

5so rank, so arduous**5**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.

10How 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.

 But at the far end of that valley of evil

 whose maze had sapped my very heart with fear

15I found myself before a little hill

 and lifted up my eyes. Its shoulders glowed

 already with the sweet rays of that planet**6**

 whose virtue leads men straight on every road,

 and the shining strengthened me against the fright

20whose 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—

25so 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

30and pushed up that dead slope at such a pace

 each footfall rose above the last. And lo!

 almost at the beginning of the rise

 I faced a spotted Leopard,**7**all tremor and flow

 and gaudy pelt. And it would not pass, but stood

35so blocking my every turn that time and again

 I was on the verge of turning back to the wood.

 This fell at the first widening of the dawn

 as the sun climbing Aries with those stars

 that rode with him to light the new creation.**8**

40Thus 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

45raging 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.

50She seemed a rack for avarice,**9**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.

55And 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**10**

 I wavered back; and still the beast pursued,

 forcing herself against me bit by bit

60till I slid back into the sunless wood.



 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.**11**

 I was born, though late, *sub Julio,* **12**and bred

70in Rome under Augustus in the noon

 of the false and lying gods.**13**I was a poet

 and sang of old Anchises’ noble son

 who came to Rome after the burning of Troy.**14**

 But you—why do *you* return to these distresses

75instead 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** :

 “Glory and light of poets! now may that **zeal**

80and 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.

85See 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

90this wilderness, for that mad beast that fleers**15**

 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

95before 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,**16**and in him

 shall be the resurrection and new day

100of that sad Italy for which Nisus died,

 and Turnus, and Euryalus, and the maid Camilla.**17**

 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.

105Therefore, 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

 in endless pain, and hear their lamentation

110as each bemoans the second death**18**of souls.

 Next you shall see upon a burning mountain**19**

 souls in fire and yet content in fire,

 knowing that whensoever it may be

 they yet will mount into the blessed choir.



115To which, if it is still your wish to climb,

 a worthier spirit**20**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**21**

 since, living, I rebelled against his law.

120He rules the waters and the land and air

 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

125and worse to dread, lead me to Peter’s gate**22**

 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.

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**Which part of Dante’s experience in the Dark Wood did you find most frightening? Explain.

**2. (a) Recall:**Which three beasts block Dante’s path?**(b) Interpret:**What emotion or idea does each beast represent?**(c) Analyze:**Why is each beast an appropriate choice for the emotion or idea it represents?

**3. (a) Recall:**Who rescues Dante?**(b) Infer:**What does the authors choice of rescuer and guide reveal about Dantes values?

**4. (a) Interpret:**Identify at least two lines in Canto I that reveal strong emotion in Dante.**(b) Analyze:**Based on his thoughts, emotions, and actions thus far, how would you describe Dantes character?**(c) Speculate:**Based on your understanding of his character, how do you think Dante will respond to the sights and sounds of Hell? Explain.

**5. Evaluate:**Does Dante the character seem like a real man on a real journey, or does the whole situation presented in Canto I seem like a fantasy? Explain.