**Canto III**

the vestibule of hell

*The Opportunists*

The Poets pass the Gate of Hell and are immediately assailed by cries of anguish. Dante sees the first of the souls in torment. They are *The Opportunists,* those souls who in life were neither for good nor evil but only for themselves. Mixed with them are those outcasts who took no sides in the Rebellion of the Angels.**1**They are neither in Hell nor out of it. Eternally unclassified, they race round and round pursuing a wavering banner that runs forever before them through the dirty air; and as they run they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets, who sting them and produce a constant flow of blood and **putrid** matter which trickles down the bodies of the sinners and is feasted upon by loathsome worms and maggots who coat the ground.

The law of Dante’s Hell is the law of symbolic retribution. As they sinned so are they punished. They took no sides, therefore they are given no place. As they pursued the ever-shifting illusion of their own advantage, changing their courses with every changing wind, so they pursue eternally an elusive, ever-shifting banner. As their sin was a darkness, so they move in darkness. As their own guilty conscience pursued them, so they are pursued by swarms of wasps and hornets. And as their actions were a moral filth, so they run eternally through the filth of worms and maggots which they themselves feed.

Dante recognizes several, among them *Pope Celestine V,* **2**but without delaying to speak to any of these souls, the Poets move on to *Acheron,* **3**the first of the rivers of Hell. Here the newly arrived souls of the damned gather and wait for monstrous Charon**4**to ferry them over to punishment. Charon recognizes Dante as a living man and angrily refuses him passage. Virgil forces Charon to serve them, but Dante swoons with terror, and does not reawaken until he is on the other side.



 i am the way into the city of woe.

 i am the way to a forsaken people.

 i am the way into eternal sorrow.

 sacred justice moved my architect.

5i was raised here by divine omnipotence,

 primordial **5**love and ultimate intellect.

 only those elements time cannot wear **6**

 were made before me, and beyond time i stand. **7**

 abandon all hope ye who enter here.



10These mysteries I read cut into stone

 above a gate. And turning I said: “Master,

 what is the meaning of this harsh inscription?”

 And he then as initiate to novice:**8**

 “Here must you put by all division of spirit

15and gather your soul against all cowardice.

 This is the place I told you to expect.

 Here you shall pass among the fallen people,

 souls who have lost the good of intellect.”

 So saying, he put forth his hand to me,

20and with a gentle and encouraging smile

 he led me through the gate of mystery.



 Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled

 on the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.

 A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled

25in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill

 and sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised

 tumult and pandemonium**9**that still

 whirls on the air forever dirty with it

 as if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,

30holding my head in horror, cried: “Sweet Spirit,

 what souls are these who run through this black haze?”

 And he to me: “These are the nearly soulless

 whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.

 They are mixed here with that **despicable** corps

35of angels who were neither God nor Satan,

 but only for themselves. The High Creator

 scourged**10**them from Heaven for its perfect beauty,

 and Hell will not receive them since the wicked

 might feel some glory over them.” And I:

40“Master, what gnaws at them so hideously

 their **lamentation** stuns the very air?”

 “They have no hope of death,” he answered me,

 “and in their blind and unattaining state

 their miserable lives have sunk so low

45that they must envy every other fate.

 No word of them survives their living season.

 Mercy and Justice deny them even a name.

 Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on.”

 I saw a banner there upon the mist.

50Circling and circling, it seemed to **scorn** all pause.

 So it ran on, and still behind it pressed

 a never-ending rout of souls in pain.

 I had not thought death had undone so many

 as passed before me in that mournful train.

55And some I knew among them; last of all

 I recognized the shadow of that soul

 who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.**11**

 At once I understood for certain: these

 were of that retrograde**12**and faithless crew

60hateful to God and to His enemies.



 These wretches never born and never dead

 ran naked in a swarm of wasps and hornets

 that goaded them the more the more they fled,

 and made their faces stream with bloody gouts

65of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet

 to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and maggots.

 Then looking onward I made out a throng

 assembled on the beach of a wide river,

 whereupon I turned to him: “Master, I long

70to know what souls these are, and what strange usage

 makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be

 in this infected light.” At which the Sage:

 “All this shall be made known to you when we stand

 on the joyless beach of Acheron.” And I

75cast down my eyes, sensing a **reprimand**

 in what he said, and so walked at his side

 in silence and ashamed until we came

 through the dead cavern to that sunless tide.



 There, steering toward us in an ancient ferry

80came an old man**13**with a white bush of hair,

 bellowing: “Woe to you depraved souls! Bury

 here and forever all hope of Paradise:

 I come to lead you to the other shore,

 into eternal dark, into fire and ice.

85And you who are living yet, I say begone

 from these who are dead.” But when he saw me stand

 against his violence he began again:

 “By other windings**14**and by other steerage

 shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here!

90A lighter craft than mine must give you passage.”

 And my Guide to him: “Charon, bite back your spleen:

 this has been willed where what is willed must be,

 and is not yours to ask what it may mean.”**15**



 The steersman of that marsh of ruined souls,

95who wore a wheel of flame around each eye,

 stifled the rage that shook his woolly jowls.

 But those unmanned and naked spirits there

 turned pale with fear and their teeth began to chatter

 at sound of his crude bellow. In despair

100they blasphemed God, their parents, their time on earth,

 the race of Adam, and the day and the hour

 and the place and the seed and the womb that gave them birth.

 But all together they drew to that grim shore

 where all must come who lose the fear of God.

105Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

 and demon Charon with eyes like burning coals

 herds them in, and with a whistling oar

 flails on the stragglers to his wake**16**of souls.

 As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down

110until the branch stands bare above its tatters

 spread on the rustling ground, so one by one

 the evil seed of Adam in its Fall**17**

 cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore

 and streamed away like birds who hear their call.

115So they are gone over that shadowy water,

 and always before they reach the other shore

 a new noise stirs on this, and new throngs gather.

 “My son,” the courteous Master said to me,

 “all who die in the shadow of God’s wrath

120converge to this from every clime and country.



 And all pass over eagerly, for here

 Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so

 their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear.**18**



 No soul in Grace comes ever to this crossing;

125therefore if Charon rages at your presence

 you will understand the reason for his cursing.”

 When he had spoken, all the twilight country

 shook so violently, the terror of it

 bathes me with sweat even in memory:

130the tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of wind

 that spewed itself in flame on a red sky,

 and all my shattered senses left me. Blind,

 like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,**19**

 I stumbled into darkness and went down.

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**Do you think that the Opportunists deserve the punishment Dante envisioned for them? Why or why not?

**2. (a) Recall:**According to the inscription on the Gate of Hell, which feeling must be abandoned by all who enter?**(b) Analyze Causes and Effects:**What effect do you think Dante intends this passage to have on the reader? Explain.

**3. (a) Recall:**Which creatures torment the Opportunists?**(b) Analyze:**In what ways do these small but fierce creatures suggest Dantes attitude toward the sins of the Opportunists? Explain.

**4. (a) Recall:**As they prepare to cross the river Acheron into Hell itself, what physical reactions do the spirits have?**(b) Interpret:**Judging from their outbursts, what emotional reactions do they experience?**(c) Infer:**Based on the details presented, what is the greatest spiritual torment of Hell? Explain.

**5. Analyze:**Why do you think Dante dwells on the physical torments of Hell?

**6. (a) Draw Conclusions:**What message does this Canto provide to readers about those who will not or cannot make a commitment to God? Explain.**(b) Synthesize:**What image might be appropriate to appear on the banner pursued by the Opportunists? Explain your answer.

**Quick Review**

An **allegory** is a literary work with two or more levels of meaning—the literal and the symbolic.

**Imagery** is the use of language that appeals to one or more of the five senses and creates word pictures for the reader.

To **interpret imagery** as you read, identify the senses to which each image appeals, note the physical experience it suggests, and identify the emotion or idea it conveys.

[
**For: Self-test**
**Visit: www.PHSchool.com**
**Web Code: eta-6503**](http://www.phschool.com/webcodes10/index.cfm?fuseaction=home.gotoWebCode&wcprefix=eta&wcsuffix=6503)

### **Literary Analysis**

**Allegory**

**1.**Who or what do you think Dante the character represents in this **allegory** ?



**2.**Use a chart like the one shown to explore the allegorical meanings of other elements in Cantos I and III.

**3.**Dante chose the poet Virgil rather than a philosopher, such as Socrates or Aristotle, to be his symbol of human reason. What does this choice suggest about the intellectual qualities he admires most?

**4. (a)**In Canto I, what prediction does Virgil make about the She-Wolf and the Greyhound?**(b)**How does this prediction reveal Dantes intention to explore both spiritual matters and earthly concerns in this allegory?

### **Connecting Literary Elements**

**5.**How does Dante’s **imagery** in Canto I contribute to the poem’s verisimilitude—its sense of reality or truth?

**6.**Does the image of souls as falling leaves merely convey a sense of great numbers, or does it contribute to the sense of despair in Canto III? Explain.

### **Reading Strategy**

**Interpreting Imagery**

**7. (a)**Begin to **interpret imagery** by listing images of light in Canto I.**(b)**What do you think light represents to Dante? Explain.

**8. (a)**Identify the senses to which the images in the last three stanzas of Canto III appeal.**(b)**Why do you think Dante swoons at this point?

### **Extend Understanding**

**9. Cultural Connection:** Dante is a national hero for the Italians. Which writers, if any, play a similar role for Americans? Explain.