

Guide to Inferno

Background

Inferno is one-third of Dante Alighieri's (1265 – 1321) Medieval poem "The Divine Comedy." As a whole, the poem tells the story of Dante's journey to redemption. He is guided by the deceased Roman poet Virgil, who was considered to be the most "virtuous" of the Roman writers. He is first led through a vision of Hell (Inferno), and then through Purgatory (Purgatorio), before arriving in Heaven (Paradiso).

Dante begins his journey lost in a forest that could be seen as a metaphor for sin. He sees a sunlit hill but cannot climb it because three wild animals, who could be seen to represent different sins, frighten him. Dante's subsequent journey to salvation is led by Virgil, who has been sent by Beatrice, the love of Dante's life, who died several years earlier. Virgil will lead Dante to Heaven, but says he must take him through Hell first. Dante is afraid to go on the journey, but is inspired by the knowledge of Beatrice watching over him.

In Inferno, the structure of Hell is basically that of a funnel, which begins on the earth's surface and narrows to the center of the earth. There are nine circles, or levels, and sinners who were the least offensive are on the first level, closest to the surface. The funnel ends at the Earth's center, where Satan resides, chewing on three of the greatest traitors in history. Each circle of Hell is reserved for people who committed particular sins, and Dante usually encounters a famous figure from history who represents that sin.

Inferno is divided into "Cantos," or verses. It may be helpful to think of those as being similar to chapters.

Character List – based on the list from Gradesaver.com

Dante

Dante's character seems to hold strong opinions, as evidenced by his passion. He is complex, as demonstrated by his fainting with pity at Francesca da Rimini's story and feeling great pity for many of the damned, but he also shows himself to be merciless, as in his dealings with Mosca.

Virgil

Virgil is best known for writing *The Aeneid*, which details the journeys of Aeneas after the fall of Troy. As part of his adventure, Aeneas journeys through the underworld. This may be why Dante chose him as a guide. The fictional Virgil is like an older, stronger, and wiser version of Dante himself: they seem to share the same moral beliefs, and of course they are both poets. Virgil's attitude toward Dante is appropriately paternal: he shows Dante the right way and even lifts him up and carries him if necessary. However, he will also scold Dante when necessary. Unlike Dante, Virgil is a true inhabitant of Hell: he is a damned soul, though a virtuous man. This colors his character with a calm despair which is not seen in Dante.

Beatrice

Beatrice, Dante's idealized woman, appears much less in *Inferno* than in the other two parts of *The Divine Comedy*. In real life, Beatrice was a woman Dante had strong feelings for, but she married another man and, most likely, never knew of Dante's feelings for her. The fictionalized Beatrice is a heavenly spirit who watches over Dante. She represents Christian virtues, and Dante's struggle to reach her mirrors his struggle to reach God.

The heavenly messenger (Canto IX)

The messenger is sent by God to make the fallen angels in Dis let Dante and Virgil in. The inhumanity of the heavenly messenger stands in contrast to the suffering souls in Hell: Dante takes care to make his sinful characters more sympathetic than the good ones. The heavenly messenger is good, but he is not likeable. Although he rescues Virgil and Dante, he disdains to speak to them.

Charon (Canto III)

Charon, a demon, ferries souls across the Acheron river into Hell.

Minos (Canto V)

Minos is a terrible demon who judges the damned souls and decides where in Hell they will be punished. He is a figure from Classical mythology: he was the son of Zeus and Europa.

Cerberus (Canto VI)

Cerberus is a dog-like demon in the third circle. Virgil calms him by throwing mud into his mouth.

Plutus (Canto VII)

Plutus is a wolf-like demon who praises Satan in a grating voice. Plutus is a Pagan figure, strongly connected with avarice. In Roman mythology he is the king of the underworld; here he is merely a servant of the Devil, whose cry probably means: "Oh Satan, oh Satan, the most powerful one!"

Phlegyas (Canto VIII)

Phlegyas is the boat-man of the river Styx, like Charon for the Acheron. He resentfully ferries Dante and Virgil across.

The Furies (Canto IX)

Women with snakes for hair from Classical mythology. Their names are Megaera, Allecto, and Tisiphone.

Geryon (Canto XVII)

A monster who symbolizes fraud itself. His face was human, gracious and honest-looking, but his body was a combination of a bear and a serpent, and his tail had a scorpion's sting.

The Malebranche

This name refers to a group of devils who patrol the lake of pitch where the barrators are punished in Malebolge. They are fierce-looking and dangerous but not very smart. The name means "evil-claws," and is also a family name in Lucca. Individual Malebranche are:

Malacoda

"evil-tail."

Alichino

same root as "harlequin."

Calcabrina

"he who can walk on brine."

Cagnazzo

"big dog," also a family name in Lucca.

Libicocco

"winds," from the two winds libeccio and sirocco.

Barbariccia

"curly beard."

Draghignazzo

"big dragon."

Circiatto

"hog."

Farfarello

"evil ghost."

Rubicante

"he who grows red."

Graffiacane

"he who scratches dogs," also a family name from Lucca.

Nimrod

A huge giant who talks in an unknown tongue and blows a huge bugle. In the Bible, he ruled in Babylon when the Tower of Babel was built. It was supposed to be tall enough to

reach the sky. God was angered by the lofty ambitions of his creations, and punished mankind by making them speak in different languages. (Formerly all men had spoken the same language, thus permitting the kind of cooperation that resulted in the Tower). Nimrod's punishment, as we see, is to speak a language that nobody else understands, and to understand no other languages: he is truly isolated.

Briareus and Ephialtes

Rebelled against the Olympian gods, who dealt with them in much the same way as the Biblical god dealt with Nimrod.

Antaneus

Was born after the rebellion; therefore, he is unfettered, though still imprisoned.

Homer

The great Greek epic poet who wrote The Iliad and The Odyssey.

Horace (65-8 BC)

A Roman satirist-moralist.

Ovid (43 BC- 17 AD)

The Roman author of the *Metamorphoses*.

Lucan (39-65)

Another Roman poet.

Electra

The mother of Dardanus, who founded Troy.

Hector

The peace-loving but warlike prince of Troy who was killed by Achilles with divine aid in Homer's Iliad.

Aeneas

The subject of Virgil's *Aeneid*. A Trojan, he escaped from his city after its fall, and after living with and abandoning Dido, the Queen of Carthage, he went to Italy.

Julius Caesar

The Roman leader whose rule ended the republic. He was assassinated by Brutus and Cassius (found in *Judecca*).

Camilla

Died defending her homeland, Latium.

Penthesilea

The Queen of the Amazons who was killed by Achilles.

King Latinus

The king of Latium.

Lavinia

Latinus' daughter and she married Aeneas.

Lucius Junius Brutus

(not the one who killed Caesar), drove out Tarquin the Proud, the last Roman king, in 510 BC. Lucretia's death prompted Brutus' action after she committed suicide after having been raped by Tarquin.

Julia

The daughter of Caesar and Pompey's wife.

Marcia

Cato's virtuous wife.

Cornelia

An exemplary mother.

Saladin

The Sultan of Egypt from 1171 to 1193. Though he was Muslim, he was famous among Christians for his nobility.

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle

All Greek philosophers. Aristotle was particularly venerated during the medieval and early Renaissance period. Democritus, Empedocles, Zeno, Diogenes, Thales, Anaxoragas and Heraclitus were also philosophers, though less well known.

Averroes (1126-1198)

An Arabian philosopher who commented on the works of Aristotle.

Dioscorides, Hippocrates, Galen (2nd century), and Avicenna (980-1037)

All physicians whose works influenced the medicine of Dante's time very much.

Orpheus and Linus

Mythological Greek poets and musicians.

Tully, Cicero and Seneca

Roman moral poets.

Euclid (around 300 BC)

A mathematician, and Ptolemy (2nd century BC) was an astronomer whose geocentric conception of the universe was very influential.

Semiramis

An immoral queen of Assyria, and is supposed to have legalized incest.

Cleopatra, queen of Egypt

She had both Julius Caesar and Marc Antony as lovers. She committed suicide to avoid being taken captive by the Romans.

Helen

The most beautiful woman in the world and the queen of Sparta, was abducted by Paris, starting the Trojan War.

Achilles

Fought heroically in the Trojan War, but unpatriotically stopped when he found he couldn't have the female captive he wanted.

Tristan

A knight of medieval romance who fell magically in love with his patron's queen, Ysolde. They died because of their love.

Dido

Queen of Carthage, loved Aeneas and killed herself when he abandoned her.

Francesca da' Rimini and Paolo Malatesta

The historical identities of Francesca and her lover are well known. Francesca da Rimini was married around 1275 to Gianciotto Malatesta of Rimini for political reasons. She unfortunately fell in love with her husband's younger brother Paolo and he with her. When her husband discovered their adultery, probably in 1285, he killed them both.

Ciacco

Gluttonous Florentine who predicts some of Florence's political future for Dante.

Filippo Argenti

Filippo Argenti is a Florentine who tries to attack Dante, and is later attacked by his fellow-sinners. He is a historical figure: he was called Argenti because he shod his horse with silver (argento means silver). There are various reasons why Dante's dislike of him was so strong: Filippo Argenti, one of the Adimari clan, was a Black Gueff. (Dante was a member of the rival party, the White Gueffs.) Filippo apparently had slapped Dante at one time, offending his aristocratic sense of honor, and his brother received Dante's goods, which were confiscated from him by the Commune of Florence when he was exiled in 1302 (see Dante's biography).

Farinata degli Uberti

Farinata, a famous Ghibelline leader, was referred to before, in Canto VI. After the battle of Montaperti in 1260, when the Ghibellines won, they proposed to destroy Florence, but Farinata intervened and saved the city. When Dante said that Farinata's people could not return to Florence, he means the defeat and exile of the Ghibelline party. The Uberti (Farinata's family) were exiled in 1280. Farinata is represented as a fairly noble character, though he was damned for Epicureanism. Epicurus was a Greek philosopher whose philosophy has been misunderstood by many moralists. He denied the immortality of the soul and thought that the Gods were not interested in human affairs. The greatest good, then, was pleasure: not debauchery, but the peaceful cultivation of the virtues. Epicurean philosophy had been popular in Florence, especially among the Ghibellines, such as Farinata. He and his wife were posthumously excommunicated in 1283, and their bones were scattered.

Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti

an Epicurean (see above), and the loving father of Guido Cavalcanti, a famous poet and a friend of Dante, also an Epicurean. He is thrown into despair at the thought that his son might be dead.

Pope Anastasius

Dante believed Anastasius (496-498) to be a follower of Photinus's heresy, which held that Christ was not divine.

The Minotaur

is a figure from Greek mythology: he was half man and half bull, the offspring of a bull and the Queen of Crete, Pasiphae, who was cursed with insane love for the bull and had a hollow cow built, in which the Minotaur was conceived. The Minotaur lived in a labyrinth beneath the palace and each year it killed and ate seven young men and seven girls who were given as tribute to Crete by defeated territories. The Minotaur was finally killed by Theseus (the Duke of Athens) with the help of the Cretan king Minos' daughter Ariadne.

The centaurs

were other mythological creatures, half horse and half man. They were notorious for their volatile tempers and violent behavior.

Nessus

tried to rape Deianira, Hercule's wife, and was shot for it with a poisoned arrow. In revenge, Nessus gave Deianira a robe dipped in his blood, which he said would make the wearer fall in love with her. When Hercules was in love with Iole, Deianira gave him the robe, which poisoned him and made him die in agony.

Chiron

was a somewhat different centaur, the tutor of Achilles, a wise and cultivated being: thus he is the one Virgil wants to talk to.

Alexander

is probably Alexander the Great of Macedon (356-323 BC), who made great conquests in a short lifetime.

Dionysius the Elder

was tyrant of Syracuse from 405 to 367 BC (not to be confused with the God of wine).

Ezzelino III (1194-1259)

a Ghibelline, massacred the citizens of Padua.

Obizzo II d'Este (1247-1293)

was a Guelph who may have been killed by his own son.

The two Riniers

were famous highwaymen.

Pier della Vigna (1190-1249)

was the minister, private secretary and counselor of Frederick II until he fell into disfavor and was put in prison and blinded. There he committed suicide, and appears in the Inferno in the form of a black and twisted tree which bleeds when a twig is broken. Dante makes it clear that he thinks Pier was innocent of the charges raised against him, although his suicide damns him. Pier's speech deserves to be read carefully: the repetitions and juxtapositions of certain words give a solemn measure to his lines.

Lano

is probably Arcolano of Siena, who belonged to the Spendthrift Club, a group of young noblemen who wasted time and money on frivolous and extravagant entertainments. According to Boccaccio, when Arcolano ran out of money he sought death in battle.

Jacopo da Santo Andrea

was a notorious squanderer.

The anonymous Florentine suicide

is a thorn bush broken during Jacopo's flight from the black hounds. Little is known about him except that he hanged himself.

Capaneus

was one of the seven legendary kings who besieged Thebes. Apparently Capaneus boasted that even Jove couldn't stop him, and was hit by a thunderbolt in retribution. In Hell he is still proud and rebellious against God.

Ser Brunetto Latini (1220-1294)

a Guelph Florentine, was a famous political leader and writer. He wrote an encyclopedia in French, called *Li Livres dou tresor*, and an Italian poem, the *Tesoretto*. Although Brunetto was not actually Dante's teacher, he seems to have been an important influence and a close friend. Dante treats him with affection and respect.

Priscian of Cesarea

was a Latin grammarian of the Middle Ages.

Francesco d'Accorso

was a lawyer at Bologna and Oxford.

Andrea de'Mozzi

the Bishop of Florence was transferred for his scandalous lifestyle by the Pope Boniface VIII (the Servant of His servants) to Vicenza. He died soon after, apparently worn out by sodomy (his tendons strained by sin).

Guido Guerra, Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, Jacopo Rusticucci

These three Florentine sodomites were all famous and honorable political leaders, evidently well respected by Dante despite their personal sins.

The usurers

are punished by having to sit on flaming sand with flakes of fire falling on them. They include members of the families Gianfigliuzzi, Obriachi and Scrovegni. Reginaldo Scrovegni's son tried to atone for his father's ill-gotten wealth by commissioning the great painter Giotto to paint a chapel named for him.

The panders and seducers

are whipped by demons.

Venedico Caccianemico

is supposed to have delivered his own sister Ghisolabella to the lustful designs of a Marquis. In fact he was not yet dead when the *Inferno* supposedly takes place; Dante was probably unaware of this.

Jason

was a hero in Greek legend who voyaged on his ship the Argo with his companions, the Argonauts. They stopped at the island of Lemnos, where the women had killed the men, except for Hypsipyle who had saved her father's life; Jason seduced and abandoned her. Medea, a princess of a different island, turned against her own people to help Jason in his quest, and was also abandoned; she avenged herself by killing the children she had had with Jason.

Flatterers

were punished by being put in a pit full of human excrement.

Alessio Interminei of Lucca

whom Dante had a hard time recognizing because of his filthiness, was there because of his flatteries.

Thais

was a harlot who had said that she was very grateful to her lover.

Pope Nicholas III

Pope Nicholas III was elected in 1277 and died in 1280; his reference to cubs of the she-bear refers to his family name, Orsini. To "advance the cubs" would be to promote his own family members in the Church hierarchy without regard to their legitimacy. This was indeed common practice in the Church, which was by no means free of the patronage systems which dominated the rest of political networking. This, and other forms of corruption within the Church, were known as simony. According to the Bible (Acts 8:9-24), Simon Magus tried to purchase the power of conferring the Holy Spirit. "Simony" thus means the sale of spiritual goods, such as ecclesiastical offices or indulgences. Simony in the Catholic Church was one of the reasons the Reformation developed: Martin Luther among others strongly objected to the practice of selling indulgences (by buying an indulgence, one bought forgiveness for a sin, and dispensed with years spent in Purgatory).

Tiresias

was a soothsayer in Greek mythology who turned from a man into a woman and back again.

Amphiaraus

is another of the seven kings who fought Thebes. He foresaw his death and tried to avoid battle, but died in an earthquake all the same.

Manto

was a Theban soothsayer who legendarily founded Mantua.

Michael Scot and Guido Bonatti

were court astrologers and Asdente was a shoemaker who prophesied in Parma at the end of the 13th century.

The Navarrese barrator

had been damned for taking graft in the household of King Thibault. His trickery and successful escape from the Malebranche give a rare example of human success over immortals, and a bending from the inexorable divine will.

Two Italian barrators

were Fra Gomito of Gallura who was a sovereign swindler, and also another Sardinian, Don Michele Zanche (whose murderer can be found in the ninth circle). The two of them often talk together about Sardinia.

The two Jovial Friars, Catalano and Loderingo

were part of an order also known as the Knight's of Saint Mary. The order was founded with the intention of keeping peace between warring factions. However the Friars often neglected their duties: the two that were in charge of maintaining peace in Florence instead oversaw a period of increased violence.

Caiaphas

was the high Jewish priest under Pontius Pilate, the Roman who oversaw Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified.

Vanni Fucci

stole from the treasury of San Jacopo, which was kept in the sacristy of the Cathedral of Pistoia. Rampino Foresi was accused of the crime and was nearly executed, while Fucci escaped.

Cianfa Donati and Agnello de' Brunelleschi

were both noble Florentine thieves. Apparently Cianfa is the snake who combines with Agnello. Puccio Sciancato was from a noble Ghibelline family in Galigai. Francesco de' Cavalcanti was murdered by the people of the town Gaville, and his family in revenge killed almost everyone in Gaville.

Ulysses (or Odysseus in the Greek form)

was a crafty member of the Greek army which besieged Troy after the Trojan prince Paris ran off with the Spartan queen Helen. After ten years were spent in useless battle, Ulysses and Diomedes came up with a plan to make a huge hollow wooden horse, fill it with Greek soldiers, and leave it in front of Troy as a "gift." It worked: the Trojans took it in and in the night the soldiers came out and laid waste to the city. Ulysses appears here as a tragic hero, whose flaw (an insatiable desire to voyage) eventually caused his death.

Guido da Montefeltro (1220-1298)

a famous Ghibelline leader who became a friar, was damned because he trusted Boniface's unconditional absolution of his sins (he was a crafty and unscrupulous commander). Boniface wanted to defeat the Colonna family, and asked Guido's advice, assuring him of absolution. Following his counsel, he offered the Colonna family amnesty if they surrendered, and when they did he massacred them. Guido's shade suffers bitter misery, and is made to appear less guilty than Boniface.

Mohammed

is of course the founder of Islam, and Ali is his nephew and successor. There is no indication that Mohammed (570-632) and Ali are not Italian, and the inclusion of the founder of Islam and his nephew among Italians and Christians shows how little Christians of the period understood Islam. Mohammed was often thought to be an apostate Christian, which explains his classification among sowers of schism: according to Dante he did not start a new religion, but merely divided an old one. Ali married Mohammed's daughter Fatima and claimed to be the successor to the caliphate. Other Muslims did not agree, and the schism resulted in two separate sects of Islam, the Sunnites and the Shiites.

Fra Dolcino

founded an order called the Apostolic Brothers, which believed in holding goods and women in common. They were condemned as heretics by Pope Clement V, and had to take to the hills to avoid the authorities. Eventually their food supplies gave out and they had to surrender; Fra Dolcino was burned alive in 1307, presumably before Dante wrote this canto.

Guido del Cassero and Angiolello di Carignano

were thrown overboard on their way to a parley held by the tyrant Malatestino.

The Ghibelline Mosca de' Lamberti

was mentioned in Canto VI. He helped create the feud between the Ghibellines and the Guelfs when in 1215 he advised the Amidei family to kill a Guelph, Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonti, for breaking his engagement to be married to an Amidei girl.

Bertran de Born (1140-1215)

was a troubadour poet among other things his beautiful works deserve to be read if they can be obtained and was thought by some to have incited Prince Henry to rebel against his father Henry II.

Geri del Bello

Dante's father's cousin, was a troublemaker who was killed by a Sacchetti. He was finally avenged in 1310, and the pointless feud begun between the Alighieri and the Sacchetti lasted until 32 years later.

Griffolino of Arezzo

cheated Albero of Siena by claiming that he could teach him to fly for a large sum of money. He was burned as a heretic by Albero's protector (and perhaps his father), the Bishop of Siena.

Capocchio

was burned at the stake for alchemy in 1293.

Gianni Schicci

impersonated Simone Donati's uncle Buoso Donati, who had just died: on Simone's request, Gianni, pretending to be Buoso, dictated a new will in favor of Simone. He also left himself Buoso's best mare, the lady of the herd.

Myrrha

daughter of the king of Cyprus, fell incestuously in love with her father, and impersonated another woman so as to sleep with him. When she was discovered, she fled execution, and was changed into a myrrh tree by the gods.

Master Adam

was a counterfeiter whose body is swollen up with dropsy. He longs for revenge on the people who prompted him to counterfeit coins.

Sinon

tricked the Trojans into bringing the wooden horse filled with Greek soldiers into Troy (see Canto XXVI).

The wife of Potiphar

falsely accused Joseph of making advances toward her.

The two sons

of the Florentine noble Alberto degli Alberti are Napoleone and Alessandro. Napoleone was a Ghibelline and Alessandro was Guelph; they murdered each other between 1282 and 1286.

Mordred

Arthur's nephew (and according to some versions, his incestuously conceived son), tried to seize power in England and was killed by his uncle for his treachery.

Focaccia

was a noble White Guelph who murdered his cousin. Sassol Mascheroni also murdered a relative.

Camiscion de' Pazzi

shared a fortress with Ubertino until he murdered him. He hopes that Carlino will "absolve him" because Carlino was a member of his family who had committed a graver act of treachery which would make his own appear less serious by contrast: Carlino betrayed his party (the Whites).

Bocca degli Abati

was another Guelph who betrayed his party: during the battle of Montaperti in 1260, he cut off the hands of the person carrying the Guelph flag, and the loss of the flag panicked the Guelphs, who were then defeated. Remember that the Ghibelline Farinata (Canto X) saved Florence after that battle by opposing the plan to destroy the city. Bocca is rebellious and doesn't tell Dante who he is even when Dante cruelly tears out his hair.

Ganelon

is a legendary figure, who was part of Charlemagne's army in the epic, the Song of Roland. When Charlemagne was returning to France after wars with the infidels in Spain, Ganelon betrayed the rear guard of the army, led by Roland. Roland was too proud to blow his horn for help, so the rear guard was massacred. Roland finally did blow the horn, and the rest of the army returned to find their dead (including Roland), and to avenge them. Ganelon was given a traitor's death.

Count Ugolino

is a tragic figure who is frightening in the depth of his hatred. He and his children were starved to death by the Archbishop Ruggieri whose head he eats in Hell. His sorrow for the slow deaths of his sons and grandsons, and his despair at his own inability to help them fuel an undying hatred for their murderer.

Fra Alberigo

was a Jovial Friar who had his relatives Manfred and Manfred's son killed during a banquet. He summoned the assassins by ordering figs. He resents his punishment: when he says that his figs have been repaid with dates, he is complaining that his punishment is too severe: dates were more expensive than figs.

Branca Doria

killed his father-in-law Michele Zanche (see Canto XXII) during a banquet.

Judas Iscariot

was the apostle who betrayed Christ. In the Bible he identified Christ for his enemies by kissing him for thirty pieces of silver

Marcus Junius Brutus

and Gaius Cassius Longus assassinated Julius Caesar in 44 BC, and both committed suicide two years later.