

Dante's Inferno: The Circles of Hell

Condensed from Wikipedia (http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Divine_Comedy)

Virgil guides Dante through the nine circles of Hell. The circles are concentric, representing a gradual increase in wickedness, and culminating at the center of the earth, where Satan is held in bondage. Each circle's sinners are punished in a fashion fitting their crimes: each sinner is afflicted for all of eternity by the chief sin he committed.

First Circle (Limbo): Here reside the unbaptized and the virtuous pagans, who, though not sinful, did not accept Christ. They are not punished in an active sense, but rather grieve only their separation from God, without hope of reconciliation. Some people in here: Homer, Socrates, and Aristotle.

Second Circle: those overcome by lust are punished in this circle. They are the first ones to be truly punished in Hell. These souls are blown about to and fro by a violent storm, without hope of rest. This symbolizes the power of lust to blow one about needlessly and aimlessly.

Third Circle: The "great worm" Cerberus guards the gluttons, forced to lie in a vile slush produced by ceaseless foul, icy rain (Virgil obtains safe passage past the monster by filling its three mouths with mud). This symbolizes the garbage that the gluttons made of their lives on earth, slaving over food.

Fourth Circle: Those whose concern for material goods deviated from the desired mean are punished in this circle. They include the avaricious or miserly, who hoarded possessions, and the prodigal, who squandered them. Each group pushes a great weight against the heavy weight of the other group. After the weights crash together, the process starts over again.

Fifth Circle: In the swamp-like water of the river Styx, the wrathful fight each other on the surface, and the sullen or slothful lie gurgling beneath the water.

Sixth Circle: Heretics are trapped in flaming tombs.

Seventh Circle: this circle houses the violent. Outer ring, housing the violent against people and property, who are immersed in Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood, to a level commensurate with their sins. Middle ring: In this ring are the suicides, who are transformed into gnarled thorny bushes and trees. They are torn at by the Harpies. The other residents of this ring are the profligates, who destroyed their lives by destroying the means by which life is sustained (i.e. money and property). They are perpetually chased by ferocious dogs through the thorny undergrowth. (Canto XIII) The trees are a metaphor; in life the only way of the relief of suffering was through pain (i.e. suicide) and in Hell, the only form of relief of the suffering is through pain (breaking of the limbs to bleed). Inner ring: The violent against God (blasphemers), the violent against nature (sodomites), and the violent against order (usurers), all reside in a desert of flaming sand with fiery flakes raining from the sky. The blasphemers lie on the sand, the usurers sit, and the sodomites wander about in groups.

Eighth Circle: The fraudulent—these guilty of deliberate, knowing evil—are located in a circle named Malebolge ("Evil Pockets"), divided into ten bolgie, or ditches of stone, with bridges spanning the ditches:

- **Bolgia 1:** Panderers (pimps) and seducers march in separate lines in opposite directions, whipped by demons. Just as they misled others in life, they are driven to march by demons for all eternity.
- **Bolgia 2:** Flatterers are steeped in human excrement. This is because their flatteries on earth were nothing but a "load of excrement" (Canto XVIII).
- **Bolgia 3:** Those who committed simony are placed head-first in holes in the rock, with flames burning on the soles of their feet (resembling an inverted baptism).
- **Bolgia 4:** Sorcerers and false prophets have their heads twisted around on their bodies backward. In addition, they cry so many tears that they cannot see. This is symbolic because these people tried to see into the future by forbidden means (and possibly retribution for the delusions they concocted that probably led their followers to their own perils); thus in Hell, they can only see what is behind them and cannot see forward.

- **Bolgia 5:** Corrupt politicians (barraters) are immersed in a lake of boiling pitch which represents the sticky fingers and dark secrets of their corrupt deals.
- **Bolgia 6:** The bridge over this bolgia is broken: The poets (Virgil and Dante) climb down into it and find the hypocrites listlessly walking along wearing gold-gilded lead cloaks.
- **Bolgia 7:** Thieves are pursued and bitten by snakes and lizards. The snake bites make them undergo various transformations, with some resurrected after being turned to ashes, some mutating into new creatures, and still others exchanging natures with the reptiles, becoming lizards themselves that chase the other thieves in turn. Just as the thieves stole other people's substance in life, and because thievery is reptilian in its secrecy, the thieves' substance is eaten away by reptiles and their bodies are constantly stolen by other thieves.
- **Bolgia 8:** Fraudulent advisors are encased in individual flames.
- **Bolgia 9:** A sword-wielding demon hacks at the sowers of discord. As they make their rounds the wounds heal, only to have the demon tear apart their bodies again.
- **Bolgia 10:** Here are various sorts of falsifiers (alchemists, counterfeiters, perjurers, and impersonators), who are a disease on society, are themselves afflicted with different types of diseases.

Ninth Circle: Traitors, distinguished from the “merely” fraudulent on that their acts involve betraying one in a special relationship to the betrayer, are frozen in a lake of ice known as Cocytus. Each group of traitors is encased in ice to a different depth, ranging from only the waist down to complete immersion. The circle is divided into four concentric zones:

- **Round 1:** Home to traitors to their kindred (family). The souls here are immersed in the ice up to their necks.
- **Round 2:** Traitors to political entities, such as party, city, or country, are located here. The souls here are immersed at almost the same level as those in round 1, except they are unable to bend their necks.
- **Round 3:** Traitors to their guests are punished here. The souls here are immersed so much that only half of their faces are visible. As they cry, their tears freeze and seal their eyes shut—they are denied even the comfort of tears.
- **Round 4:** Judecca, named for Judas the Iscariot, Biblical betrayer of Christ, is for traitors to their lords and benefactors. All of the sinners punished within are completely encapsulated in ice, distorted to all conceivable positions.

Satan is trapped in the frozen central zone in the Ninth Circle of Hell. Condemned to the very center of hell for committing the ultimate sin (treachery against God) is Satan, who has three faces, one red, one black, and one pale yellow, each having a mouth that chews on a prominent traitor. Satan himself is represented as a giant, terrifying beast, weeping tears from his six eyes, which mix with the traitors' blood sickeningly. He is waist deep in ice, and beats his six wings as if trying to escape, but the icy wind that emanates only further ensures his imprisonment (as well as that of others in the ring). The sinners in the mouths of Satan are Brutus and Cassius in the left and right mouths, respectively. They were involved in the assassination of Julius Caesar—and act which, to Dante, represented the destruction of a unified Italy. In the central, most vicious mouth is Judas Iscariot—the namesake of this zone and the betrayer of Jesus. Judas is being administered the most horrifying torture of the three traitors, his head in the mouth of Lucifer, and his back being forever skinned by the claws of Lucifer. What is seen here is a perverted trinity. Satan is impotent, ignorant, and evil while God can be attributed as the opposite: all powerful, all knowing, and all good.