Canto I

Dante finds himself lost in a dark wood, the path he was following lost. He does not remember how he lost his way. Above, he sees a great hill that seems to offer protection from the shadowed glen. The sun shines down from this hilltop, and Dante attempts to climb toward the light, but is blocked in his ascent by a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf, who force him to turn back in fear for his life. As he returns to the glen, defeated, the poet Virgil appears. Thrilled to meet the poet he admires most, Dante tells Virgil about the beasts that blocked his path. Virgil replies that the she-wolf kills all who approach her but that a magnificent hound will one day come to chase the her back to Hell, where she came from. He adds that the she-wolf’s presence means that a different path must be taken; he offers to serve as Dante’s guide, and tells him that the only way he can get back to the right path is to travel through Hell and Purgatory and finally reach Heaven. Dante accepts Virgil as his guide.

Canto II

Dante invokes the Muses and asks them to help him tell of his experiences. As Dante and Virgil approach the mouth of Hell, his mind turns to the journey ahead and again he feels a great sense of dread. He can recall only two men who have ever ventured into the afterlife and returned: the Apostle Paul, who visited the Third Circle of Heaven, and Aeneas, who travels through Hell in Virgil’s [Aeneid](http://www.wikisummaries.org/wiki/Aeneid). Dante considers himself less worthy than these two and fears that he may not survive his journey. Virgil rebukes Dante for his cowardice and then reassures him with the story of how he knew to find Dante and act as his guide. According to Virgil, a woman in Heaven took pity upon Dante when he was lost and came down to Hell (where Virgil lives) to ask Virgil to help him. This woman was Beatrice, Dante’s departed love, who is now counted among the blessed. She had learned of Dante’s plight from St. Lucia, also in Heaven, who in turn heard about the poor poet from an unnamed lady, most likely the Virgin Mary. Thus, a trio of holy women watches over Dante from above. Virgil says that Beatrice wept as she told him of Dante’s misery and that he found her pleas deeply moving. Dante feels comforted to hear that his beloved Beatrice has gone to Heaven and cares so much for him. He praises both her and Virgil for their help and then continues to follow Virgil toward Hell.

Canto III

Virgil leads Dante up to the Gate of Hell, upon which they read a foreboding inscription that includes the admonition “abandon all hope, you who enter here.” As soon as they enter, Dante hears innumerable cries of torment and suffering. Virgil explains that these cries emanate from the souls of those who did not commit to either good or evil but who lived their lives without making conscious moral choices; therefore, both Heaven and Hell have denied them entry. These souls now reside in the Ante-Inferno, within Hell yet not truly part of it, where they must chase constantly after a blank banner. Flies and wasps continually bite them, and writhing worms consume the blood and tears that flow from them. The souls of the uncommitted are joined in this torment by the neutral angels—those who sided with neither God nor Satan in the war in Heaven. Virgil leads Dante to a great river called Acheron, which marks the border of Hell. A crowd of newly dead souls waits to be taken across. A boat approaches with an old man, Charon, at its helm. Charon recognizes Dante as a living soul and tells him to keep away from the dead, but after Virgil informs him that their journey has been ordained from on high, Charon troubles them no longer. He returns to his work of ferrying the miserable souls, wailing and cursing, across the river into Hell. As he transports Virgil and Dante across, Virgil tells the frightened Dante that Charon’s initial reluctance to ferry him bodes well: only damned souls cross the river. Suddenly, an earthquake shakes the plain; wind and fire rise up from the ground, and Dante, terrified, faints.

Canto IV

A clap of thunder restores Dante to consciousness. When he wakes, feeling as though he has been asleep for a long time, he finds himself on the other side of the river, apparently having been carried off the boat by Virgil. He looks down into a deep valley that stretches in front of him: the First Circle of Hell, or Limbo. Virgil informs him that this circle, which contains the souls of those who led virtuous lives but either were born before the advent of Christianity (and thus could not properly honor God) or were never baptized. Dante asks if any souls have ever received permission to leave Limbo for Heaven, and Virgil names a number of Old Testament figures—Noah, Moses, and others. Christ granted these souls amnesty when he descended into Hell during the time between his death and resurrection (an episode commonly known as the Harrowing of Hell). Many other notable figures, however, remain in Limbo. Virgil himself resides here, and has been given only a brief leave to guide Dante. Dante watches a group of men approach and greet Virgil as a fellow poet. Virgil introduces them as Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan—the greatest poets of antiquity. They lead Dante to a great castle with seven walls, wherein he sees the souls of other great figures from the past: the philosophers Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato; Aeneas, Lavinia, and other characters from the Aeneid; the mathematician Euclid and the astronomer Ptolemy; and many others. Virgil guides Dante out of the castle and again off into the darkness.

Canto V

Dante and Virgil now descend into the Second Circle of Hell, smaller in size than the First Circle but greater in punishment. They see the monster Minos, who stands at the front of an endless line of sinners, assigning them to their torments. The sinners confess their sins to Minos, who then wraps his great tail around himself a certain number of times, indicating the number of the circle to which the soul must go. Like Charon, Minos recognizes Dante as a living soul and warns him not to enter; it is Virgil’s word that again allows them to pass unmolested. Dante and Virgil pass into a dark place in which torrential rains fall ceaselessly and gales of wind tear through the air. The souls of the damned in this circle swirl about in the wind, swept helplessly through the stormy air. These are the Lustful—those who committed sins of the flesh. Dante asks Virgil to identify some of the individual souls to him; they include many of great renown, including Helen, for whose sake the Trojan War was fought, and Cleopatra. Dante immediately feels sympathy for these souls, for essentially they are damned by love. With Virgil’s permission, he calls out to the souls to see if they will speak to him and tell him their story. One woman, Francesca, recognizes Dante as a living soul and answers him. She relates to him how love was her undoing: bound in marriage to an old and deformed man, she eventually fell in love with Paolo da Rimini, her husband’s younger brother. One day, as she and Paolo sat reading an Arthurian legend about the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, each began to feel that the story spoke to their own secret love. When they came to a particularly romantic moment in the story, they could not resist kissing. Francesca’s husband quickly discovered their transgression and had the young lovers killed. Now Paolo and Francesca are doomed to spend eternity in the Second Circle of Hell. Overcome with pity, Dante faints again.

Canto VI

When Dante wakes, he finds that he has been moved to the Third Circle of Hell, where the rains still fall. Now, however, the drops consist of filth and excrement, and a horrific stench fills the air. A three-headed dog, Cerberus, tries to stop Virgil and Dante’s progress, but Virgil satisfies the beast by throwing it a chunk of earth. Dante and Virgil then advance into the circle of the Gluttonous, who must lie on the ground as the sewage rains down upon them. One of the Gluttonous sits up when he sees Virgil and Dante, and asks if Dante recognizes him. When Dante replies that he does not, the shade announces himself as Ciacco, saying that he spent his earthly life in Florence. At Dante’s request, he voices his predictions for Florence’s political future, which he anticipates will be filled with strife. Dante then asks about figures from Florence’s political past, naming individuals he believes to have been well intentioned. Ciacco replies that they reside in a much deeper circle of Hell. Before lying back down, he asks Dante to remember his name when he returns to the world above. As they leave the Third Circle, Dante asks Virgil how the punishments of the souls will change after the Last Judgment. Virgil replies that since that day will bring the perfection of all creation, their punishments will be perfected as well.

Canto VII

Virgil and Dante continue down toward the Fourth Circle of Hell and come upon the demon Plutus. Virgil quiets the creature with a word and they enter the circle, where Dante cries out at what he sees: a ditch has been formed around the circle, making a great ring. Within the ring, two groups of souls push weights along in anger and pain. Each group completes a semicircle before crashing into the other group and turning around to proceed in the opposite direction. The souls condemned to this sort of torturous, eternal jousting match, Virgil explains, are those of the Avaricious and the Prodigal, who, during their lives, hoarded and squandered, respectively, their money. Dante, as before, inquires whether he knows any of the souls here. Virgil informs him that most of the Avaricious are corrupt clergymen, popes, and cardinals but adds that the experiences they undergo here render them unrecognizable. He notes that the Avaricious and Prodigal share one essential characteristic: they were not prudent with the goods of Fortune. Dante asks Virgil to explain the nature of this “Fortune.” Virgil replies that Fortune has received orders from God to transfer worldly goods between people and between nations. Her swift movements evade human understanding; thus, men should not curse her when they lose their possessions. Pondering this explanation, Dante follows Virgil down to the Fifth Circle of Hell, which borders the muddy river Styx. They see souls crouched on the bank, covered in mud, and striking and biting at each other. They are the Wrathful, those who were consumed with anger during their lives. Virgil alerts Dante to the presence of additional souls here, which remain invisible to him as they lie completely submerged in the Styx—these are the Sullen, those who muttered and sulked under the light of the sun. They now gurgle and choke on the black mud of the swampy river.

Canto VIII

Continuing around the Fifth Circle of Hell, Virgil and Dante come to a tall tower standing on the bank, its pinnacle bursting with flames. Virgil and Dante encounter the boatman Phlegyas, who takes them across the Styx at Virgil’s prompting. On the way, they happen upon a sinner whom Dante angrily recognizes as Filippo Argenti. He has no pity for Argenti and gladly watches the other sinners tear him apart as the boat pulls away. Virgil announces that they are now approaching the city of Dis—Lower Hell. As they near the entrance, a host of fallen angels cries out. They demand to know why one of the living dares to try to enter Dis. Virgil again provides a rationale for Dante’s presence, but, for the first time, he proves unsuccessful in gaining entrance. The demons slam the gate in Virgil’s face, and he returns to Dante hurt but not defeated.

Canto IX

Dante grows pale with fear upon seeing Virgil’s failure. Virgil, who appears to be waiting for someone impatiently, weakly reassures Dante. Suddenly, Dante sees three Furies—creatures that are half woman, half serpent. They shriek and laugh when they notice Dante, and call for Medusa to come and turn him into stone. Virgil quickly covers Dante’s eyes so that he will not see Medusa’s head. An enormous noise from behind scatters the Furies. Virgil and Dante turn to see a messenger from Heaven approaching across the river Styx, with souls and demons fleeing before him like flies. He arrives at the gate and demands that it be opened for the travelers; he is promptly obeyed. Virgil and Dante pass through the gate of Dis and enter the Sixth Circle of Hell. Tombs surround them, glowing among fiercely hot flames; here lie the Heretics.

Canto X

Still in the Sixth Circle of Hell, Dante and Virgil wander among the fiery tombs of the Heretics. Virgil describes the particular heresy of one of the groups, the Epicureans, who pursued pleasure in life because they believed that the soul died with the body. Suddenly, a voice from one of the tombs interrupts them and addresses Dante as a Tuscan (Tuscany is the region of Italy in which Florence is located). The voice belongs to a soul whom Virgil identifies as Farinata, a political leader of Dante’s era. Virgil encourages Dante to speak with him. Dante and Farinata have hardly begun their conversation when another soul, that of Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, the father of Dante’s intimate friend Guido, rises up and interrupts them, wondering why his son has not accompanied Dante here. Dante replies that perhaps Guido held Virgil in disdain. (According to some translations of Inferno, Dante says that Guido held God, or Beatrice, in disdain. The point is a matter of considerable debate among scholars.) Frantic, the shade reads too much into Dante’s words and assumes that his son is dead. In despair, he sinks back down in his grave. Farinata continues discussing Florentine politics. He and Dante clearly represent opposing parties (though these parties are not named), yet they treat each other politely. From Farinata’s words and those of the nearby soul, Dante realizes that the shades in Hell can see future events but not present ones. Farinata can prophesy the future—he predicts Dante’s exile from Florence—but remains ignorant of current events. Farinata confirms that, as part of their punishment, the Heretics can see only distant things. Virgil calls Dante back, and they proceed through the rest of the Sixth Circle. Farinata’s words have made Dante apprehensive about the length of time remaining for his exile, but Virgil assures him that he will hear a fuller account when they come to a better place.

Canto XI

At the edge of the Seventh Circle of Hell rises a stench so overpowering that Virgil and Dante must sit down at the tomb of Pope Anastasius in order to adjust to it. Virgil takes the opportunity to explain the last three circles of Hell and their respective subdivisions. The Seventh Circle of Hell, which contains those who are violent, is subdivided into three smaller circles: they punish the sins of violence against one’s neighbor, against oneself, and against God. Worse than any violence, however, is the sin of fraud, which breaks the trust of a man and therefore most directly opposes the great virtue of love. The last two circles of Hell thus punish the Fraudulent. The Eighth Circle punishes “normal fraud”—sins that violate the natural trust between people. Such fraud includes acts of hypocrisy and underhanded flattery. The Ninth Circle, the seat of Dis, punishes betrayal—sins that violate a relationship of particularly special trust. These are the loyalties to kin, to country and party, to guests, and to benefactors. Dante asks Virgil why these divisions of Hell exist, wondering why the sinners they have seen previously do not receive this same degree of punishment, as they too have acted contrary to divine will. In response, Virgil reminds Dante of the philosophy set forth in Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, which posits the existence of “[t]hree dispositions counter to Heaven’s will: / Incontinence, malice, insane brutality” (XI.79–80). The disposition of incontinence offends God least, says Virgil, and thus receives a more lenient punishment, outside of the city of Dis. Dante then asks for clarification of one more theological issue: why is usury a sin? Virgil explains to Dante that usury goes against God’s will because a usurer makes his money not from industry or skill (“art”)—as Genesis stipulates that human beings should—but rather from money itself (in the form of interest). Thus, usurers also go against God’s “art,” or His design for the world. The two poets now progress toward the First Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell.

Canto XII

The passage to the First Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell takes Virgil and Dante through a ravine of broken rock. At the edge, the monstrous Minotaur threatens them, and they must slip past him while he rages to distraction. As they descend, Virgil notes that this rock had not yet fallen at the time of his previous journey into the depths of Hell. Coming into the ring, they see a river of blood: here boil the sinners who were violent against their neighbors. A group of Centaurs—creatures that are half man, half horse—stand on the bank of the river with bows and arrows. They shoot at any soul that tries to raise itself out of the river to a height too pleasant for the magnitude of his or her sin. The head Centaur, Chiron, notices that Dante moves the rocks that he walks on as only a living soul would. He draws an arrow, but Virgil commands him to stand back, and he obeys. Because the broken rocks make the ring treacherous to navigate, Virgil also asks that a Centaur be provided to guide them through the ring around the boiling blood. Chiron provides one named Nessus, on whose back Dante climbs. Leading Virgil and Dante through the ring, Nessus names some of the more notable souls punished here, including one called Alexander (probably Alexander the Great), Dionysius, and Atilla the Hun. Those who lived as tyrants, and thus perpetrated violence on whole populations, lie in the deepest parts of the river. After fording the river at a shallow stretch, Nessus leaves the travelers, who continue on into the Second Ring.

Canto XIII

In the Second Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell, Virgil and Dante enter a strange wood filled with black and gnarled trees. Dante hears many cries of suffering but cannot see the souls that utter them. Virgil cryptically advises him to snap a twig off of one of the trees. He does so, and the tree cries out in pain, to Dante’s amazement. Blood begins to trickle down its bark. The souls in this ring—those who were violent against themselves or their possessions (Suicides and Squanderers, respectively)—have been transformed into trees. Virgil tells the damaged tree-soul to tell his story to Dante so that Dante may spread the story on Earth. The tree-soul informs them that in life he was Pier della Vigna, an advisor to Emperor Frederick, and that he was a moral and admirable man. But when an envious group of scheming courtiers blackened his name with lies, he felt such shame that he took his own life. Dante then asks how the souls here came to be in their current state. The tree-soul explains that when Minos first casts souls here, they take root and grow as saplings. They then are wounded and pecked by Harpies—foul creatures that are half woman, half bird. When a tree-soul’s branch is broken, it causes the soul the same pain as dismemberment. When the time comes for all souls to retrieve their bodies, these souls will not reunite fully with theirs, because they discarded them willingly. Instead, the returned bodies will be hung on the soul-trees’ branches, forcing each soul to see and feel constantly the human form that it rejected in life. At this point, two young men run crashing through the wood, interrupting Dante’s conversation with the tree-soul. One of the men, Jacomo da Sant’Andrea, falls behind and leaps into a bush; vicious dogs have been pursuing him, and now they rend him to pieces. Virgil and Dante then speak to the bush, which is also a soul: it speaks of the suffering that has plagued Florence ever since it decided to make St. John the Baptist its patron, replacing its old patron, Mars (a Roman god). The bush-soul adds that he was a Florentine man in life who hanged himself.

Canto XIV

Dante gathers the bush’s scattered leaves and gives them to the bush. He and Virgil then proceed through the forest of tree-souls to the edge of the Third Ring of the Seventh Circle of Hell. Here they find a desert of red-hot sand, upon which flakes of fire drift down slowly but ceaselessly. As Virgil expounded in Canto XI, this ring, reserved for those who were violent against God, is divided into three zones. The rain of fire falls throughout all three. The First Zone is for the Blasphemers, who must lie prone on a bank of sand. The falling flakes of fire keep the sand perpetually hot, ensuring that the souls burn from above and below. Among these sinners Dante sees a giant, whom Virgil identifies as Capaneus, one of the kings who besieged Thebes. Capaneus rages relentlessly, insisting that the tortures of Hell shall never break his defiance. The poets reach another river, which runs red, and Virgil speaks to Dante about the source of Hell’s waters. Underneath a mountain on the island of Crete sits the broken statue of an Old Man. Tears flow through the cracks in the statue, gathering at his feet. As they stream away, they form the Acheron, the Styx, the Phlegethon, and finally Cocytus, the pool at the bottom of Hell.

Canto XV

Crossing the stream, Virgil and Dante enter the Second Zone of the Seventh Circle’s Third Ring, where the Sodomites—those violent against nature—must walk continuously under the rain of fire. One of these souls, Brunetto Latini, recognizes Dante and asks him to walk near the sand for a while so that they may converse. Latini predicts that Dante will be rewarded for his heroic political actions. Dante dismisses this prediction and says that Fortune will do as she pleases. Virgil approves of this attitude, and they move on as Latini returns to his appointed path.

Canto XVI

Still in the Second Zone among the Sodomites, Dante is approached by another group of souls, three of whom claim to recognize Dante as their countryman. The flames have charred their features beyond recognition, so they tell Dante their names. Dante recalls their names from his time in Florence and feels great pity for them. They ask if courtesy and valor still characterize their city, but Dante sadly replies that acts of excess and arrogance now reign. Before leaving the Second Zone, Virgil makes a strange request. He asks for the cord that Dante wears as a belt, then throws one end of it into a ravine filled with dark water. Dante watches incredulously as a horrible creature rises up before them.

Canto XVII

Dante now sees that the creature has the face of a man, the body of a serpent, and two hairy paws. Approaching it, he and Virgil descend into the Third Zone of this circle’s Third Ring. Virgil stays to speak with the beast, sending Dante ahead to explore the zone, inhabited by those who were violent against art (Virgil has earlier denoted them as the Usurers). Dante sees that these souls must sit beneath the rain of fire with purses around their necks; these bear the sinners’ respective family emblems, which each “with hungry eyes consumed” (XVII.51). As they appear unwilling to talk, Dante returns to Virgil. In the meantime, Virgil has talked the human-headed monster into transporting them down to the Eighth Circle of Hell. Fearful but trusting of his guide, Dante climbs onto the beast’s serpentine back; Virgil addresses their mount as “Geryon.” To Dante’s terror and amazement, Geryon rears back and suddenly takes off into the air, circling slowly downward. After setting them down safely among the rocks at the edge of the Eighth Circle of Hell, Geryon returns to his domain.

Canto XVIII

Virgil and Dante find themselves outside the Eighth Circle of Hell, known as Malebolge (“Evil Pouches”). Dante describes the relationship between the circle’s structure and its name: the circle has a wall running along the outside and features a great circular pit at its center; ten evenly spaced ridges run between the wall and the pit. These ridges create ten separate pits, or pouches, in which the perpetrators of the various forms of “ordinary fraud” receive their punishments. Virgil leads Dante around the left side of the circle, where they come upon the First Pouch. Here, Virgil and Dante see a group of souls running constantly from one side of the pouch to the other. On both of the pouch’s containing ridges, demons with great whips scourge the souls as soon as they come within reach, forcing them back to the opposite ridge. Dante recognizes an Italian there and speaks to him; the soul informs Dante that he lived in Bologna and now dwells here because he sold his sister to a noble. This pouch is for the Panders (pimps) and the Seducers—those who deceive women for their own advantage. Moving on, Virgil and Dante also see the famous Jason of mythology, who abandoned Medea after she helped him find the Golden Fleece. As Virgil and Dante cross the ridge to the Second Pouch, a horrible stench besieges them, and they hear mournful cries. Dante beholds a ditch full of human excrement, into which many sinners have been plunged. From one of these souls, he learns that this pouch contains the Flatterers. After a few seconds, Virgil says that they have seen enough of this foul sight. They progress toward the Third Pouch.

Canto XIX

Dante already knows that the Third Pouch punishes the Simoniacs, those who bought or sold ecclesiastical pardons or offices. He decries the evil of simony before he and Virgil even view the pouch. Within, they see the sinners stuck headfirst in pits with only their feet protruding. As these souls writhe and flail in the pits, flames lap endlessly at their feet. Dante notes one soul burning among flames redder than any others, and he goes to speak with him. The soul, that of Pope Nicholas III, first mistakes Dante for Boniface. After Dante corrects him, the soul tells Dante that he was a pope guilty of simony. He mourns his own position but adds that worse sinners than he still remain on Earth and await an even worse fate. Dante asserts that St. Peter did not pay Christ to receive the Keys of Heaven and Earth (which symbolize the papacy). He shows Nicholas no pity, saying that his punishment befits his grave sin. He then speaks out against all corrupt churchmen, calling them idolaters and an affliction on the world. Virgil approves of Dante’s sentiments and helps Dante up over the ridge to the Fourth Pouch.

Canto XX

In the Fourth Pouch, Dante sees a line of sinners trudging slowly along as if in a church procession. Seeing no apparent punishment other than this endless walking, he looks closer and finds, to his amazement, that each sinner’s head points the wrong way—the souls’ necks have been twisted so that their tears of pain now fall on their buttocks. Dante feels overcome by grief and pity, but Virgil rebukes him for his compassion. As they pass by the Fourth Pouch, Virgil names several of the sinners here, who were Astrologers, Diviners, or Magicians in life. He explains the punishment of one specific sinner, saying that, since this individual wanted to use unholy powers to see ahead in life (that is, into the future), he has now been condemned to look backward for all of time. Virgil and Dante also see the sorceress Manto there, and Virgil relates a short tale of the founding of Mantua. They then continue on to the Fifth Pouch.

Canto XXI

Entering the Fifth Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell, Dante sees “an astounding darkness.” The darkness is a great pit filled with a kind of boiling tar similar to what the Venetians used to patch their ships (XXI.6). As Dante examines the pitch to determine its composition, Virgil yells for him to watch out: a demon races up the rocks on the side of the pit, grabbing a new soul and tossing him into the blackness. As soon as the sinner comes up for breath, the demons below—the Malabranche, whose name means “evil claws”—thrust him back underneath with their prongs. Virgil now advises Dante to hide behind a rock while he tries to negotiate their passage. The Malabranche at first act recalcitrant, but once he tells them that their journey is the will of Heaven, they agree to let the two travelers pass. They even provide an escort of ten demons—a necessary accompaniment, they say, as one of the bridges between the pouches has collapsed. Malacoda, the leader of the Malabranche (his name means “evil tail”), informs them of the exact moment that the bridge fell: 1,266 years, one day, and five hours before the present moment. Malacoda adds that a nearby ridge provides an alternate route.

Canto XXII

The group goes forward, with Dante carefully watching the surface of the pitch for someone with whom to converse. He has few opportunities, as the sinners cannot stay out of the pitch long before getting skewered. Finally, Virgil manages to talk to one of the sinners who is being tortured outside of the pit. The soul, a Navarrese, explains that he served in the household of King Thibault and was sent to the Fifth Pouch because he accepted bribes—this pouch, then, contains the Barterers. The conversation breaks off as the tusked demon Ciriatto rips into the soul’s body. Virgil then asks the soul if any Italians boil in the pitch. The soul replies that it could summon seven if the travelers wait for a moment. A nearby demon voices the suspicion that the soul merely intends to escape the demons’ tortures and seek the relative relief of the pitch below. The other demons turn to listen to their coworker, and the soul races back to the pitch and dives in, not intending to return. Furious, two of the demons fly after the soul but become mired in the sticky blackness. As the other demons try to free their comrades, Virgil and Dante take the opportunity to make a discreet exit.

Canto XXIII

As he and Virgil progress, Dante worries that they may have provoked the demons too much with this embarrassment. Virgil agrees. Suddenly, they hear the motion of wings and claws from behind, and turn to see the demons racing after them in a mad pack. Virgil acts quickly. Grabbing hold of Dante, he runs to the slope leading to the Sixth Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell. He then slides down the slope with Dante in his arms, thus foiling the demons, who may not leave their assigned pouch. Now in the Sixth Pouch, Virgil and Dante see a group of souls trudging along in a circle, clothed in hats, cowls, and capes. Dante soon notices that lead lines their garments, rendering them massively heavy. One of the shades recognizes Dante’s Tuscan speech and begs Dante to talk with him and his fellow sinners, as they include Italians in their ranks. These are the Hypocrites. The sight of one of them in particular stops Dante short: he lies crucified on the ground, and all of the other Hypocrites trample over him as they walk. The crucified sinner is Caiphus, who served as high priest under Pontius Pilate. Virgil asks one of the sinners for directions to the next part of Hell. He finds that Malacoda lied to him about the existence of a connecting ridge, and now learns the proper route.

Canto XXIV

Making their way to the Seventh Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell, Virgil and Dante face many dangers. Because of the collapsed bridge, they must navigate treacherous rocks, and Virgil carefully selects a path before helping his mortal companion along. Dante loses his breath for a moment, but Virgil urges him onward, indicating that a long climb still awaits them. They descend the wall into the Seventh Pouch, where teeming masses of serpents chase after naked sinners; coiled snakes bind the sinners’ hands and legs. Dante watches a serpent catch one of the sinners and bite him between the shoulders. He watches in amazement as the soul instantly catches fire and burns up, then rises from the ashes to return to the pit of serpents. Virgil speaks to this soul, who identifies himself as a Tuscan, Vanni Fucci, whom Dante knew on Earth. Fucci tells them that he was put here for robbing a sacristy—the Seventh Pouch holds Thieves. Angered that Dante is witnessing his miserable condition, he foretells the defeat of Dante’s political party, the White Guelphs, at Pistoia.

Canto XXV

Cursing God with an obscene gesture, Fucci flees with serpents coiling around him, and Dante now relishes the sight. Moving further along the pit, he and Virgil behold an even more incredible scene. Three souls cluster just beneath them, and a giant, six-footed serpent wraps itself so tightly around one of them that its form merges with that of its victim; the serpent and soul become a single creature. As the other souls watch in horror, another reptile bites one of them in the belly. The soul and the reptile stare at each other, transfixed, as the reptile slowly takes on the characteristics of the man and the man takes on those of the reptile. Soon they have entirely reversed their forms.

Canto XXVI

Having recognized these thieves as Florentines, Dante sarcastically praises Florence for earning such widespread fame not only on Earth but also in Hell. Virgil now leads him along the ridges to the Eighth Pouch, where they see numerous flames flickering in a deep, dark valley. Coming closer, Virgil informs Dante that each flame contains a sinner. Dante sees what appear to be two souls contained together in one flame, and Virgil identifies them as Ulysses and Diomedes, both suffering for the same fraud committed in the Trojan War. Dante desires to speak with these warriors, but Virgil, warning him that the Greeks might disdain Dante’s medieval Italian, speaks to them as an intermediary. He succeeds in getting Ulysses to tell them about his death. Restlessly seeking new challenges, he sailed beyond the western edge of the Mediterranean, which was believed to constitute the rim of the Earth; legend asserted that death awaited any mariner venturing beyond that point. After five months, he and his crew came in view of a great mountain. Before they could reach it, however, a great storm arose and sank their ship.

Canto XXVII

After hearing Ulysses’ story, Virgil and Dante start down their path again, only to be stopped by another flame-immersed soul. This soul lived in Italy’s Romagna region, and now, hearing Dante speak the Lombard tongue, he asks for news of his homeland. Dante replies that Romagna suffers under violence and tyranny but not outright war. He then asks the soul his name, and the sinner, believing that Dante will never leave the abyss and thus will be unable to spread word of his infamy, consents to tell him. He introduces himself as Guido da Montefeltro and states that he was originally a member of the Ghibellines. After a time, he underwent a religious conversion and joined a Franciscan monastery, but he was then persuaded by Pope Boniface VIII to reenter politics on the opposing side. At one point, Boniface asked him for advice on how to conquer Palestrina (formerly called Penestrino, it served as the fortress of the Ghibelline Colonna family). Da Montefeltro showed reluctance, but Boniface promised him absolution in advance, even if his counsel were to prove wrong. He then agreed to give his advice, which turned out to be incorrect. When he died, St. Francis came for him, but a devil pulled him away, saying that a man could not receive absolution before sinning, for absolution cannot precede repentance and repentance cannot precede the sin. Such preemptive absolution he deemed “contradictory,” and thus invalid. Calling himself a logician, the devil took da Montefeltro to Minos, who deemed the sinner guilty of fraudulent counsel and assigned him to the Eighth Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell.

Canto XXVIII

Virgil and Dante continue on to the Ninth Pouch, where they see a line of souls circling perpetually. Dante sees they bear wounds worse than those suffered at the battles at Troy and Ceparano. A devil stands at one point of the circle with a sword, splitting open each sinner who walks by. One of the sinners speaks to Dante as he passes—it is Mohammed, prophet of the Muslims. These are the Sowers of Scandal and Schism, and for their sins of division they themselves are split apart. Worse, as they follow the circle around, their wounds close up so that they are whole by the time they come back to the sword, only to be struck again. Many others in this line look up at Dante, hearing his living voice. The Italians among them beg Dante to carry messages to certain men still living on Earth. They make predictions of a shipwreck and give a warning for Fra Dolcino, who is in danger of joining them when he dies. Finally, Dante sees a man carrying his own head in his hands: it is Bertran de Born, who advised a young king to rebel against his father.

Canto XXIX

Virgil reprimands Dante for staring so long at the wounded souls, reminding him that their time is limited; this time, however, Dante stubbornly follows his own inclination. He takes note of one more soul, an ancestor of his who died unavenged. Finally, Virgil and Dante follow the ridge down and to the left until they can see the Tenth Pouch below them. This pouch houses the Falsifiers, and it is divided into four zones. In the First Zone, souls huddle in heaps and sprawl out on the ground. Scabs cover them from head to foot; they scratch at them furiously and incessantly. Dante locates two Italians in this zone. Since his journey will take him back to the world of the living, he offers to spread their names among men if they will tell him their stories. The two souls oblige. One of them is Griffolino of Arezzo, who was burned at the stake for heresy but has landed here in the Tenth Pouch for his practice of the occult art of alchemy. The other is a Florentine, Capocchio, who was likewise an alchemist burned at the stake. We learn that the First Zone holds the Falsifiers of Metals.

Canto XXX

Beholding the Second Zone in the Tenth Pouch of the Eighth Circle of Hell, Dante recalls stories of antiquity in which great suffering caused humans to turn on each other like animals. But the viciousness portrayed in these stories pales in comparison with what he witnesses here, where the sinners tear at each other with their teeth; these are the Falsifiers of Others’ Persons. Dante sees a woman, Myrrha, who lusted after her father and disguised herself as another in order to gratify her lust. Some of the sinners of the Third Zone, the Falsifiers of Coins, mingle among these souls. Dante speaks with Master Adam, who counterfeited Florentine money; part of his punishment is to be racked with thirst. Adam points out two members of the Fourth Zone, the Falsifiers of Words, or Liars: one is the wife of Potiphar, who falsely accused Joseph of trying to seduce her, and the other is a Greek man, Sinon. The latter apparently knows Adam and comes over to pick a fight with him. Dante listens to them bicker for a while. Virgil harshly reprimands his companion, telling him that it is demeaning to listen to such a petty disagreement.

Canto XXXI

As Virgil and Dante finally approach the pit in the center of the Eighth Circle of Hell, Dante sees what appear to be tall towers in the mist. Going closer, he realizes that they are actually giants standing in the pit. Their navels are level with the Eighth Circle, but their feet stand in the Ninth Circle, at the very bottom of Hell. One of the giants begins to speak in gibberish; he is Nimrod, who, via his participation in building the Tower of Babel, brought the confusion of different languages to the world. Virgil names some of the other giants whom they pass until they come to Antaeus, the one who will help them down the pit. After listening to Virgil’s request, Antaeus takes the two travelers in one of his enormous hands and slowly sets them down by his feet, at the base of the enormous well. They are now in the Ninth Circle of Hell, the realm of Traitors.

Canto XXXII

Dante feels that he cannot adequately express the grim terror of what he and Virgil see next, but he states that he will nevertheless make an attempt. Walking past the giant’s feet, the two come upon a vast frozen lake, as clear as glass—Cocytus. In the ice, souls stand frozen up to their heads, their teeth chattering. The First Ring of the Ninth Circle of Hell is called Caina (after Cain, who, as Genesis recounts, slew his brother, Abel), where traitors to their kin receive their punishment. Virgil and Dante see twins frozen face to face, butting their heads against each other in rage. Walking farther, Dante accidentally kicks one of the souls in the cheek. Leaning down to apologize, he thinks he recognizes the face—it turns out to belong to Bocca degli Abati, an Italian traitor. Dante threatens Bocca and tears out some of his hair before leaving him in the ice. Virgil and Dante progress to the Second Ring, Antenora, which contains those who betrayed their homeland or party. Continuing across the lake, Dante is horrified to see one sinner gnawing at another’s head from behind. He inquires into the sin that warranted such cruelty, stating that he might be able to spread the gnawing sinner’s good name on Earth.

Canto XXXIII

The sinner raises himself from his gnawing and declares that in life he was Count Ugolino; the man whose head he chews was Archbishop Ruggieri. Both men lived in Pisa, and the archbishop, a traitor himself, had imprisoned Ugolino and his sons as traitors. He denied them food, and when the sons died, Ugolino, in his hunger, was driven to eat the flesh of their corpses. Dante now rails against Pisa, a community known for its scandal but that nevertheless has remained unpunished on Earth. He and Virgil then pass to the Third Ring, Ptolomea, which houses those who betrayed their guests. The souls here lie on their backs in the frozen lake, with only their faces poking out of the ice. Dante feels a cold wind sweeping across the lake, and Virgil tells him that they will soon behold its source. The poets react with particular horror at the sight of the next two souls in the Third Ring, those of Fra Alberigo and Branca d’Oria. Although these individuals have not yet died on Earth, their crimes were so great that their souls were obliged to enter Hell before their time; devils occupy their living bodies aboveground. After leaving these shades, Virgil and Dante approach the Fourth Ring of the Ninth Circle of Hell, the very bottom of the pit.

Canto XXXIV

Still journeying toward the center of the Ninth Circle of Hell, Dante becomes aware of a great shape in the distance, hidden by the fog. Right under his feet, however, he notices sinners completely covered in ice, sometimes several feet deep, contorted into various positions. These souls constitute the most evil of all sinners—the Traitors to their Benefactors. Their part of Hell, the Fourth Ring of the Ninth Circle, is called Judecca. Dante and Virgil advance toward the giant, mist-shrouded shape. As they approach through the fog, they behold its true form. The sight unnerves Dante to such an extent that he knows not whether he is alive or dead. The figure is Lucifer, Dis, Satan—no one name does justice to his terrible nature. The size of his arms alone exceeds all of the giants of the Eighth Circle of Hell put together. He stands in the icy lake, his torso rising above the surface. Gazing upward, Dante sees that Lucifer has three horrible faces, one looking straight ahead and the others looking back over his shoulders. Beneath each head rises a set of wings, which wave back and forth, creating the icy winds that keep Cocytus frozen. Each of Lucifer’s mouths holds a sinner—the three greatest sinners of human history, all Traitors to a Benefactor. In the center mouth dangles Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ. In the left and right mouths hang Brutus and Cassius, who murdered Julius Caesar in the Roman Senate. Brutus and Cassius appear with their heads out, but Judas is lodged headfirst; only his twitching legs protrude. The mouths chew their victims, constantly tearing the traitors to pieces but never killing them. Virgil tells Dante that they have now seen all of Hell and must leave at once. Putting Dante on his back, Virgil performs a startling feat. He avoids the flapping wings and climbs onto Lucifer’s body, gripping the Devil’s frozen tufts of hair and lowering himself and his companion down. Underneath Cocytus, they reach Lucifer’s waist, and here Virgil slowly turns himself around, climbing back upward. However, Dante notes with amazement that Lucifer’s legs now rise above them, his head below. Virgil explains that they have just passed the center of the Earth: when Lucifer fell from Heaven, he plunged headfirst into the planet; his body stuck here in the center. According to Virgil, the impact caused the lands of the Southern Hemisphere to retreat to the North, leaving only the Mountain of Purgatory in the water of the South. Dante and Virgil climb a long path through this hemisphere, until they finally emerge to see the stars again on the opposite end of the Earth from where they began.