

# Canto

## Definition of Canto

Canto is a subdivision or part in a [narrative](#) or epic poem, consisting of five or more lines such, as a [stanza](#), which could also be a canto. The word “canto” originates from the Latin word *cantus*, which means “a song.”

The Italian poets Dante, Matteo Boiardo, and Ludovico used cantos to divide their poems into shorter sections for thematic understanding. In English literature, Edmund Spenser is the first poet who used this division in his famous poem “The Faerie Queene.” Lord Byron also used this division in his poem, “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.”

## Examples of Canto in Literature

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### Example #1: *The Faerie Queene* (by Edmund Spenser)

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“The Patron of true Holinesse,  
FouleErrour doth defeate:  
Hypocrisie him to entrappe,  
Doth to his home entreate.  
Gentle Knight was pricking on the plaine,  
Y clad in mightiearmes and suluersshielde,  
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,  
The cruellmarkes of many’ a bloudyfielde;  
Yet armes till that time did he neuer wield;  
His angry steede did chike his foming bitt,  
As much disdainig to the curbe to yield.”

This canto describes the [character](#) of the knight, who represents all the qualities of chivalry, such as bravery and fighting spirit. It comprises eleven lines, as compared to six or seven lines of Italian cantos.

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### Example #2: *Inferno* (by Dante Alighieri)

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“One night, when half my life behind me lay,  
I wandered from the straight lost path afar.  
Through the great dark was no releasing way;  
Above that dark was no relieving star.  
If yet that terror'd night I think or say,  
As death's cold hands its fears resuming are.  
Gladly the dreads I felt, too dire to tell,  
The hopeless, pathless, lightless hours forgot,  
I turn my tale to that which next befell,  
When the dawn opened, and the night was not.”

This is another good example of canto, a major section of Dante's “[Divine Comedy](#).” Here, Dante describes how he loses the right path when travelling through the forest. However, this canto comprises ten lines as opposed to eleven lines of the first example.

### Example #3: *The Cantos* (by Ezra Pound)

“And then went down to the ship,  
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly seas, and  
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward  
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas,  
Circe's this craft, the trim-coifed goddess ...”

Ezra Pound has written this poem in 129 parts, and each part is a separate canto. This is the first part in which he describes a journey by ship, which is loaded with sheep, and is sailing away from some hidden place. The word ‘Circe’ is a reference to Homer's epic, “*The Odyssey*,” which points to the eerie [atmosphere](#) created by Pound in this poem.

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### Example #4: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (by Lord Byron)

“I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;  
A Palace and a Prison on each hand  
I saw from out the wave her structures rise  
As from the stroke of the Enchanter’s wand:  
A thousand Years their cloudy wings expand  
Around me, and a dying Glory smiles  
O’er the far times, when many a subject Land  
Looked to the winged Lion’s marble piles,  
Where Venice sate in state, throned on her hundred isles!”

This is the fourth canto of “Child Harold’s Pilgrimage,” in which he describes his journey to Italy. It also shows his lamentation on the decay of ancient civilization.

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#### **Example #5: *Don Juan* (by Lord Byron)**

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“I want a Hero: an uncommon Want,  
When every Year and Month sends forth a new one,  
Till, after cloying the Gazettes with Cant,  
The Age discovers he is not the true one;  
Of such as these I should not care to vaunt  
I’ll therefore take our ancient friend Don Juan;  
We all have seen him in the Pantomime,  
Sent to the Devil, somewhat ere his time.”

This is the first canto, in which Lord Byron says that his own age is unable to provide a suitable hero for his poem – the reason that he is using an old friend, Don Juan, as a hero.

### **Function**

Canto is used as an introduction to a poem, as well as serves as a unitary [prologue](#) to an entire epic. It also enables the reader to understand different turning points in the poem. The use of canto divides episodes in a poem to make it easier for the reader to understand.