

# INFERNO

## INTRODUCING CANTO I



The dark forest—*selva oscura*—in which Dante finds himself at the beginning of the poem (Inf. 1.2) is described in vague terms, perhaps as an indication of the protagonist's own disorientation. The precise nature of this disorientation—spiritual, physical, psychological, moral, political—is itself difficult to determine at this point and thus underscores two very important ideas for reading this poem: first, we are encouraged to identify with Dante (the character) and understand knowledge to be a learning process; second, the poem is carefully structured so that we must sometimes read "backwards" from later events to gain a fuller understanding of what happened earlier.

Characteristic of Dante's way of working, this "dark wood" is a product of the poet's imagination likely based on ideas from various traditions. These include the medieval Platonic image of chaotic matter—unformed, unnamed—as a type of primordial wood (*silva*); the forest at the entrance to the classical underworld (Hades) as described by Virgil (*Aeneid* 6.179); Augustine's association of spiritual error (*sin*) with a "region of unlikeness" (*Confessions* 7.10); and the dangerous forests from which the wandering knights of medieval Romances must extricate themselves. In an earlier work (*Convivio* 4.24.12), Dante imagines the bewildering period of adolescence—in which one needs guidance to keep from losing the "good way"—as a sort of "meandering forest" (*erronea selva*).

**From Danteworlds  
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According to Dante, Canto I serves as an introduction to the whole *Divine Comedy*.

- Dante is the central character in the work. It's about "our life's journey" (we're all invited to read ourselves into the story allegorically), but it's essentially, especially about one man, Dante himself.
- We seem to know very little about him, but we know more than we think, if we do a really careful, close reading, as we will. He'll become very recognizable, I think—all we have to do is put ourselves in his shoes and look around and there's a lot we can relate to. How did we get here? What does it feel like? Where are we going? How will we get there? Fundamental questions all.
- Canto I brings us up close to one man who has to go on a "journey." It's a journey that's a kind of a rescue mission. Our character is "lost" in "dark wood." At the end of the Canto he's "found" (by Virgil) and ready to undertake a journey through an "eternal realm." He's stepping out of time into eternal time. (That sounds familiar to us, I hope.) Who is Dante as he starts out? Who will he be by the time he's finished? Will he grow and change as a result of this journey? What will he learn?
  - The *Inferno* is a book about the problem of evil, the nature of "sin" and its punishment; it's a kind of a moral map and compass. Dante has a lot to learn about the nature of evil, about the nature of divine justice. It's based on a system of rewards and punishments; the justice in Hell is eternal punishment. Canto I puts Dante in the "valley of evil—where corruption is the rule and where people suffer wrongly and needlessly. Treachery, fraud, violence, chaos is everywhere, infecting everything. Is this valley of evil our Hell on Earth, the world outside of the Garden? It seems that the wood is our world, and Dante wakes up to an awareness of it. It's a dark wood, a dark labyrinth, a "moral maze" to get lost in—and we may wander in the same maze today, coerced by propaganda, advertising, materialism.
  - In the beginning, we'll see, he's lost, confused, almost in a kind of stupor, a little "stupid." In the early Cantos he has to struggle with the pity he feels for the suffering he sees (the sinners who are being punished). He has to learn not to misplace his sympathy, and to trust in the divine justice he's experiencing.
  - His journey in the *Inferno* is going to take him through nine circles of Hell, where the punishments gradually get more and more severe as the sins become more and more "evil." Divine retribution functions according to a system he gets to observe, a system of "contrapasso"—the punishments are ingeniously suited to the sins, sometimes mirroring them. This isn't the wilderness, the savage maze of man's imperfect justice, but God's perfect justice, and it takes a little getting used to, as we'll see.

## Canto I, The Dark Wood

### 1. What is the “dark wood”? How did Dante get there?

The dark wood is vague and not clearly defined; it’s really open to our interpretation. As an image it seems hugely archetypal—a wild place, fearful and dangerous. It’s a place we might get lost in, confused, or a place where we might end up when we’ve become lost or become confused. Dante says that he lost the straight path and must have wandered there somehow, though he doesn’t remember exactly how or why.

The interesting thing is that by the time you finish reading the *Inferno*, you’ll have a pretty strong notion of the nature of this place. Hindsight

But for now this dark wood seems like an intentionally vague place. The character who wakes and “finds himself” there is as disoriented as we are. He seems to be thinking, where am I? I’m lost, this is terrifying! How do I get out of here??

Although this dark wood is Dante’s image, and it will always be associated with him, he may have had several sources in mind as he invented it. Guy P. Raffa (*Danteworlds*) suggests that he might have been thinking of Plato’s vague, primordial “chaotic matter.” Dante calls it a wild, savage, untamed place—the image of a “jungle” comes to mind, and even Joseph Conrad’s (and Francis Ford Coppola’s) “heart of darkness.” The dark wood may represent our primordial human condition, perhaps, our earthly home away from home, out of the Garden and into the Dark Wood. Perhaps, in the Ptolemaic scheme, the dark wood is our earthly home, imperfect, savage, corrupt. Raffa goes on to suggest that Dante may be borrowing Virgil’s image from the *Aeneid*—because there’s a forest before the entrance to Hades—and because Dante borrows images from Virgil’s underworld throughout the *Inferno*. Then again, he suggests, it could be an Augustinian wood, a dark place to mirror the darkness in our souls when we sin; so perhaps Dante wanders here because this is where all sinners wander, all bad choices and irresponsibility lead to this dark wood. There are plenty of dangerous, dark woods in the medieval romances of the period, and Raffa offers this suggestion as well. He tells us, too, that Dante wrote in the *Convivio* about adolescence as a time when it was possible to “lose the good way” and wind up in a “meandering forest.”

It’s possible that the dark wood is ambiguous and not completely knowable because the journey we are taking involves a learning process, and understanding the dark wood represents knowledge we don’t have yet, but will get soon.

I think it is all these things. And more.

It might also be personally, for Dante, the dark wood of exile, of a kind of homelessness (though he was never destitute). It’s a dark wood of isolation, alienation: the sense that you are “THEM” in an “US and THEM” world.

It might be personally, for Dante, the dark wood of intellectual error. It might be the error of mistaking human reason for the agent of salvation, which is not reason but *love*. Philosophy is a consolation, but ultimately it is only that and no more. It can set you on a straight and level path, but it can’t climb the stair. It won’t get you to St. Peter’s Gate. In fact, in a worst case scenario, it might even lead you astray. The problem is that philosophy cannot account

for the problem of evil, the problem of *pure evil* in the world—because philosophy is rational and pure evil is irrational, savage.

**2. What’s the significance of Dante “waking up” HALFWAY through the course of his life? He says he was so “full of sleep” that he can’t even tell when he began to lose his way....why does he wake up HALFWAY through?**

- A time when you’ve had a chance to make lots of choices, and you’ve made a lot of bad ones
- A time when you’ve begun to realize your mortality, which is scary
- A time when you may panic: “I’ve got to change my life!”

That halfway point = mid-life... Mid-life is that time when you’ve already had lots of time to make a lot of choices in your life, a lot of important decisions. Why would that make a difference? Because if you’ve had a chance to make choices, there’s a good chance you have made some pretty bad ones. The syllogism goes something like this:

[Major premise] If humans have free will,  
[Minor premise] And free will implies choices, some of which will necessarily be bad,  
It follows that humans make bad choices.

Most people will agree with that conclusion. Then what follows:

If humans make bad choices,  
And Dante is human,  
Then it follows that Dante by mid-life, will have made some bad choices...taken some wrong turns, lost his way.

There are a lot of significant premises up there, the most important one being right at the top: humans have free will. Mid-life would not be a time to be aware of bad choices if we did not have those choices to begin with. The reality and the *consequences* of our human free will, which we saw so deftly and so eloquently depicted in Genesis, is going to be a major theme of this work. As one of the commentators in the video explained, Dante insists that we are moral agents acting on our free choices.

We take this so for granted that it almost seems to go without saying, but it was not exactly taken for granted in the middle ages. The classical view of the universe, as well as the view of things from a biblical perspective, is that God, the divine presence, in whatever form, is here with us, acting upon us, acting through us. If something happens, it happens because God willed it to happen that way, not because people had that power. Gradually the concrete presence of the divine recedes, until, in the Renaissance, the human subject becomes absolutely central. But here, in this work, just a little ahead of its time, human consciousness, human behavior is already front and center, and free will is front and center. The further we get from the actual presence of God and the direct knowledge of “God’s will,” the freer we become, until, in Dante’s poem, the human subject is something completely, and terrifyingly, free. That is the terror that Dante feels in Canto I. The terror of becoming unmoored. The terrifying understanding that we’re all free to make a complete mess of things. It’s not the same message as Genesis, which we looked at earlier in the term; in that story, human beings are disobedient—but they know God’s will.

The result could be anarchy, existential anarchy—meaninglessness. Nihilism. A savagely dark wood from which there is no escape. But Dante does escape, and *The Divine Comedy* is an attempt to bring order to the moral and social chaos of free will and bad choices. Because your bad choices don't affect you alone; they affect the whole social fabric.

### **3. What was the sleeping state Dante was in before?**

That would seem to be “youth”—innocence, ignorance, youth.

- Youth, that sense of invincibility. Immortality.
- Youth: the future is full of promise. Dreamy.
- Youth: you have dreams. Illusions, fantasies.

All of these things are mainly positive, and we'd like to keep them forever, but sadly we can't. Eventually we fall into an awareness of mortality, like Adam and Eve; we reach the peak of that crest and we start looking back instead of forward; our dreams have faded. Once you get the knowledge of good and evil, you have to leave the Garden, and the imperfect world you enter may feel (by comparison) like being “lost” in a “dark wood.”

Do all adults “wake up”? Is this something that happens to everyone? Or just to Dante?

Some people stay asleep, in good ways and bad.

On the positive side, don't you think there are lots of people who even when they're 95 are able to “think young,” retain their dreams, or dream new dreams when old ones fade? One of my comp students wrote a paper recently about her 78 year old grandmother who went to college for the first time and got her degree at age 83. That's thinking young! Some people never lose that sense of promise when they think about the future, and we would call this good, I think. There's a kind of innocence associated with people like that, and I don't think you'll find any of them in the *Inferno*. They may have found salvation by another path. Or maybe they just aren't in need of it.

But there are other adults who “stay asleep” in a less positive, more negative way. Dante characterizes these folks as the “Neutrals,” and we meet them in Canto III. These are the comfortably numb—the complacent, the endlessly distracted, the ones who know what's right but never act on what they know. On the more painful side, these are the nihilists who see the world as it is in all its imperfection and seeming absurdity, and declare everything to be meaningless, purposeless.

Dante, then, can consider himself lucky he wakes up. He might have stayed asleep and been one of those neutrals, or worse.

**4. Let's stay with this image of waking up in a strange, dark, savage, tangled, rough place—a place you don't entirely recognize and which you can't remember getting to. It sounds like someone on a bender, doesn't it? A kind of hangover from drunkenness? What's that feeling, and why is there at the beginning of the *Inferno*? When you imagine yourself in those shoes, what state do you realize Dante is in as the poem opens?**

- A state of confusion!!
- Shame
- Loss of control
- Can't undo what he's already done; he's here and he can't "put the toothpaste back in the tube"—he doesn't even fully remember what he's done
- Stupor
- Despite his confusion, he's stuck dealing with the consequences: he's lost

The consequences have arrived whether he was aware he was headed towards them or not. Consequences, if you are walking blindly, eventually you may walk into a pole, or off a cliff. If you choose blindness over sight, ignorance over understanding, neglect over responsibility, you're going to meet the consequences, and it may be unpleasant.

Consequences. Suddenly you wake up and you're in the middle of them. Maybe you wake up and find you've graduated from college an alcoholic; or maybe you were raped, maybe you got pregnant. Maybe you hurt someone; maybe you can't find your way back to reality, you've lost all ambition like Keats' knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci"; maybe you'll become willing to do anything for another fix; maybe you have lost all tender feelings and become hardened and cold inside; maybe you made people so mad at you that you are exiled, excommunicated, sentenced to be burned at the stake.

Consequences: everything is changed. It's a long, tough road out of the woods. And it's a long road out for Dante in this poem, as he has to arrive at a more complete understanding; he has to put the whole world back in order before he can save himself. You'll notice that he has to choose to make that journey. Virgil has to persuade him. There's *always* that *choice*. You might be thinking, with all the divine help on his side, the three women in Canto II, he'd be pretty stupid not to do it, right? But still, he has to *choose*. People have been known to make the stupid choice now and then, but Dante the Pilgrim makes the "right" one this time.