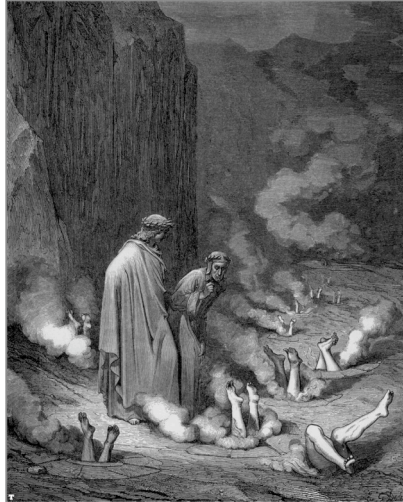


Inferno: Malebolge

Inferno: The Eighth Circle, Malebolge



Malebolge, Dante's name for the Eighth Circle, continues the circular, funnel-shaped landscape; it's graded very steeply downward towards a really low, central pit. This central pit will be the next and last circle, the very bottom and center of Hell. Before arriving at the center, the travelers have to make their way into and then up out of 10 deep ditches, or "pouches" ("bolgia"), that make up the eighth circle. Each pouch is devised to punish a particular class of sins, all related to fraud. The contrapasso becomes more and more severe the deeper the travelers descend. At the bottom of Malebolge, the horror is not for faint-hearted readers.

Fraud incurs a severe form of divine justice because it involves the active use of reason, our distinctly human, angelic faculty, for unnatural ends. The sins of incontinence may be less severely punished because they can be considered crimes of passion which don't involve the intellect as directly. Sins of violence can go either way—they are sometimes crimes of passion, sometimes premeditated. Violent crimes against your neighbor are likely to involve the least amount of will, whereas violence against God, Art ("God's grandchild"), and Nature are more likely to involve the will. Fraud, however, *always* involves a perversion of human intelligence—that is, human intelligence used for evil (rather than angelic) purposes. There is always the active use of reason, the active free will involved.

Since humans are distinguished compared to the "lower" animals by their intelligence, it stands reason that to corrupt this aspect of yourself, to abuse reason, is to fail most miserably at being a human being, and to be, consequently, the worst possible sinner.

Malebolge is constructed this way:

Canto 18

- **In Pouch One** demons spur and drive the pimps and the seducers. One of the notables we encounter here is Jason, a figure who features prominently in Greek mythology (Jason and the Golden Fleece, Jason and Medea).
- **Pouch Two** contains the Flatterers who are sunk up to their necks in excrement. The contrapasso is not hard to figure out here: they spewed “b.s.” while alive, so now they get to swim in it. Interesting how Virgil hurries them along out of this pouch... “let our sight be satisfied” he says, but I’m sure his nose was eager to make a quick getaway, too.

Canto 19

Pouch Three holds the Simoniacs (sellers of church favors). These sinners are positioned upside down in “bins” that resemble baptismal fonts. The soles of their feet are set ablaze. They stay in this position until new sinners arrive, then they drop down into the rock crevices, layered and pressed flat upon one another for all eternity.

- Note how, in his address to readers, Dante expresses full acceptance, full understanding of Divine Justice; in his opening lines he even levels a kind of threat for readers to beware of sinning in this way. He seems to be gaining confidence, getting his bearings. He’s not disturbed by this but gratified. Later in the canto he lashes out boldly at Pope Nicholas III (p. 155). This is real progress in the battle against pity. Dante has no pity for the squirming Pope, but rather enjoys the sight.
- Notice, too, how Dante acknowledges Virgil’s ability to read him like a book (p. 153). He’s been doing this a little while now, and here is where Dante openly acknowledges Virgil’s uncanny ability to know what the Pilgrim is thinking and feeling. This is a theme that plays all through this circle, as we see Virgil anticipating Dante’s thoughts so intimately it almost seems as if he can read Dante’s mind. Can he? What’s the significance of calling attention to this?

Canto 20

In Pouch Four Dante sees the Fortunetellers. These sinners have their heads on backwards and must walk “backwards” for all time. In life, they attempted to “see” the future, now in death they must see the past. It is here that Dante sees Tiresias, the soothsayer from the ancient Greek myths.

- The battle against pity resumes as Dante sympathizes with the fortunetellers who are contorted and twisted so that their heads face backward, an ingenious contrapasso for their sins. Virgil has strong words for Dante, seeing him once again making this error in judgment (p. 159).

- Notice how Virgil launches into a long discourse on the history of his hometown, Mantua. Dante comments that Virgil's speech inspires "certainty," presumably because it is about the past rather than the future. If we want to see clearly, we have to look behind and understand where we've been, not try to "divine" the future through false prophecies, a pagan practice. Notice how Dante, after Virgil's history lesson, says that his mind "turns back" to the fortunetellers and their fate, which is a kind of a pun. It also re-emphasizes Dante's mistaken orientation in this canto, which has Virgil a little peeved. They are still talking as they exit the pouch; I imagine Virgil is lecturing Dante on being less sympathetic.

Canto 21-22

Pouch Five holds the Grafters. These are people who use their official offices for profit or personal gain; they make money or win advantage by an abuse of their office. Barratry, specifically, is the buying or selling of church or state office. These sinners are immersed in sticky tar ("pitch")—a fitting punishment for their "sticky fingered" crimes. These sinners are watched over by the "Malebranche," demons armed with murderous hooks and claws which they use to keep the sinners under the pitch.

- We hear that Dante and Virgil have been chatting like chums. They do not quarrel at all anymore, even when Dante is in the wrong. Virgil doesn't get haughty with him. Notice how Virgil is very quick to protect Dante from the Malebranche.
- These two cantos are famous for their slapstick comedy. It's a little comic relief from the seriousness that's been and the horror that's to come.
 1. The sinner rises butt first and the Malebranche call his butt his "Sacred Face," which is a reference to a landmark in the city where he comes from
 2. Sinners are like meat in a stew of tar
 3. When the demons try to attack Virgil he plays them like a fiddle; there's no real fear involved.
 4. The demons beg to give Dante just "one touch on the rump" but their leader rebukes them
 5. The leader's name is "Malacoda" or "Bad-Tail" (Bad Ass?). Canto 21 ends with a fart. ("And the leader made a trumpet of his ass.")
 6. The troop of Malebranche all have names that are puns on families from an Italian city Dante is parodying.
 7. In Canto 22, a sinner is caught because he's too stupid or too slow to dive away. All we know about him is that he's from Navarre.
 8. The Malebranche rip at the sinner they catch, but it's not horrifying. Just as he was slow getting away, he's slow to respond to his punishment, which involves ripping out a muscle in his arm. He just "stares at his wound" (p. 181). Then he proceeds to lie through his teeth. He wheels and deals and "sells" them a promise of seven other souls to torment, if they just stand aside and let him whistle. They suspect his cunning and threaten him elaborately, but he convinces them he'll be cunning on their behalf. When he dives away and escapes, the demons are so furious at

being tricked they end up fighting among themselves and *they* end up in the pitch. They are baked to a hard crust before they can be “rescued.”

- The whole experience is likened to an Aesop’s fable at the beginning of the next canto: the treacherous frog (the Malebranche) are defeated and the innocent mouse (Virgil and Dante) go free.

Canto 23

In Pouch Six Dante sees the Hypocrites who now wander through all eternity weighed down by heavily weighted robes that appear golden and bright on the outside, but inside are laden with heavy lead. Hypocrites deliberately manipulate appearances to be more attractive than reality.

- Considering how their experience was like an Aesop’s fable leads Dante to realize that the Malebranche are likely to be hopping mad and he suggests getting out of there right away, before there’s trouble. Virgil readily agrees, and we see something new here. Dante is the one to suggest the plan of action; Virgil goes along—it’s a real sign of progress.
- Virgil’s loving care is emphasized; the way he carries Dante (and he carries Dante a lot from here on out) is described in maternal terms.
- Notice how angry Virgil gets when he realizes that the Malebranche lied to him! His anger explodes across his brow, which Dante finds disturbing. There is a little bit of suspense as to how Virgil will react to his anger that leads us into the next canto.

Canto 24

Here in **Pouch Seven** the Thieves are punished. Their punishment is fairly complicated. At first they are surrounded by monstrous snakes that coil like ropes around the hands, binding them fast. Once immobilized, another reptile darts out to strike the sinner’s throat, causing the sinner to explode into flame. But the punishment is not over yet—from the flaming ashes, the sinner re-emerges to undergo the torment again and again.

- The long, elaborate pastoral simile that opens Canto 24 reminds me of Virgil’s Eclogues, a form of poetry that celebrates the simple agricultural life and the virtues of living close to nature; here Dante demonstrates how Virgil is able to put his anger aside, how he is able to master that animal emotion, that bestial side of himself—he can conquer his body—something he will urge Dante to accomplish later in the Canto. Dante fondly recalls the “sweet face” that Virgil showed him in the dark wood of Canto I, the sweet face that rescued him from despair. It’s a poignant moment that reminds us of the feeling Dante has for Virgil.
- Athletes take note of the passage where Virgil urges Dante to dig deep and find the soul to go on despite being tired of body. He argues that FAME (honor, reputation, being known for your great deeds) is only won by putting your whole soul into the effort and conquering your body. What is life without fame? A thin wisp of smoke easily dispersed into thin air. To really

win fame (a form of earthly immortality to correspond to spiritual immortality), you must conquer your body. Dante responds and really tries to follow Virgil's advice, hiding his tiredness in a stream of speech. Philadelphia sports fans demand no less of their teams than what Virgil demands here.

- After we see Fucci flaming into ashes, he tells Dante a prophecy “to bring him grief.” It's a prediction about Dante's bleak political future. Yet does it bring Dante grief? He never even mentions it! He completely shrugs off these worldly gains and losses now. He has his eyes on the prize.
- In Canto 25, there's the memorable image of Fucci giving two “figs” to God, a major blasphemy. He runs away, demons hot in pursuit.
- The horror of the thief who exchanges substance with a serpent is something new in terms of metamorphoses, as Dante boasts. Let Ovid and Lucan (both famous Roman poets of antiquity) come and look on. The contrapasso is pretty obvious: the thieves stole others' substance, so they must lose their own.

Canto 26, 27

The Evil Counselors are punished in **Pouch Eight**, hidden in great cups of flame that symbolize their guilty consciences. Here Dante sees Ulysses and Diomedes, the instigators of the Trojan Horse ploy.

- The highlight of this canto is the travelers' encounter with Ulysses, the hero of Homer's great epics, the *Iliad*, which tells the story of Greeks' defeat of Troy, and the *Odyssey*, which tells the story of Ulysses' adventures as he returns home from the war.
- Dante's portrayal of Ulysses is ambiguous, like many of the great memorable characters we meet in the *Inferno*. Like Francesca, Farinata, and Brunetto Latini, Ulysses' “sin” may be recognized by some readers as a kind of nobility; all of these characters present “traps” for the Pilgrim, who must struggle to understand the nature of their sin, being very close to them in one way or another. There's much to sympathize with in the case of Ulysses, and there are so many parallels between Dante and Ulysses to observe. They have a lot in common. First, understand that Dante invents this episode in the life of Ulysses. He imagines Ulysses' death. It is not in Homer or Virgil. As far as those poets are concerned he was a great hero who helped the Greeks win the Trojan War; at the end of the *Odyssey*, he is home with his wife and son.
 - Now look at what Dante invents for him, beginning with his speech on p. 221. Note the nobility of character. Ulysses has a tragic flaw, however, and that is his wanderlust, his thirst for “experience”—for knowledge of the world which is not his to have. Why is it forbidden? Why does his ship sink within sight of Mt. Purgatory?
 - What are the parallels between Ulysses?
 - Ulysses drowns in the sea that Dante has metaphorically come out of in Canto I (he almost drowned, but didn't). Both characters come within sight of Mt. Purgatory but can't reach

it. Both have pursued it by the wrong road. Ulysses “thirst for knowledge” is pagan, and Dante has equally lost the “straight road.” When Ulysses spots Purgatory, God sends out a storm to destroy his ship.

- Both characters have a thirst for knowledge; when he was younger Dante pursued learning with vigor and thought Philosophy was to be his “consolation” after the death of Beatrice.
 - Both are leaders, counselors—but Ulysses give false counsel and Dante true (the *Commedia*).
 - Both are extremely clever (the poem is Dante’s evidence of cleverness; Ulysses is celebrated for his cleverness).
 - Both have political cunning (Ulysses was able to persuade Achilles to go to war, and he devised the strategy of the Trojan Horse)
- In Canto 27, we meet Montefeltro, another “false counselor,” a contemporary of Dante’s this time, a character whose discussion seems to prefigure some of the Machiavellian arguments made in *The Prince*, a hundred and fifty years or so later. This is interesting because the character would never speak about these secret things if he thought word would get out. These are the dirty little secrets that politicians like to keep hidden from public view, but which Dante exposes here, before Machiavelli.

Canto 28

Pocket Nine holds the sowers of religious, political and family discord. In life these people ripped apart peace and placidity; now in death they are ripped apart physically. Dante sees Mahomet, who, in Dante’s view represents religious schism. Mahomet’s torso is ripped by a sword slice. As he approaches, Dante observes that Mahomet is “mangled and split open.” Dante then sees Bertrand de Born, a French troubadour/knight traditionally blamed for the rift between Henry II and his son. As he comes closer, Dante sees that de Born’s head has been severed—as he advances he holds his head before him like a lantern, one of the most horrifying scenes in the whole poem.

- It makes sense that the blood and gore which feature prominently in this canto should be present. Schism leads to feuding and war. There’s an immediate focus in this canto on the horrors of war, the physical and mental toll it takes, the insanity that can ensue.
- The ripped torsos of Mahomet and Ali, his nephew, are vivid and horrifying... Muslims would not like this canto.
- The severed head at the end of the canto is one of the more gruesome images in the entire *Inferno*, though we’ve yet to experience the horrors of Circle 9.
- Notice that Dante expresses a modified kind of pity at the beginning of the Canto (p. 245, 247), but he’ll lose his pity entirely by Circle 9. This is the last of it.

Canto 29-30

In **Pocket Ten** Dante views the falsifiers—alchemists, evil impersonators (NOT Elvis impersonators!), counterfeiters, and false witnesses. These sinners, who in life, corrupted all, now are made to endure every sort of corruption and pain. Darkness, dirt, filth, disease, hunger, thirst and noise surround them.

- Notice Virgil rebukes Dante sternly for his “low desire” to eavesdrop...Dante is so shamed that Virgil forgives him right away.

Canto 31: An Interlude

Canto 31 is a chance for the travelers to get their bearings. They're about to enter the 9th Circle...they can see, through the mist, darkly. At the bottom of Malebolge a ring of Giants guard the central pit.

THEMATIC OBSERVATIONS



If you've been following the "battle against pity" theme, you can note especially:

- Dante rides the roller coaster through much of the book, feeling pity, feeling disgust, feeling pity once again, but he does make some solid progress, especially by the end.
- Read the Cantos in circle nine with the battle against pity theme in mind. What do you notice?

If you've been following developments in the relationship between Dante and Virgil, you can note especially:

Virgil and Dante develop a very poignant relationship, one of total trust, deep bonding. Virgil is very parental towards Dante, very nurturing, and very loving. There are many instances in the second half of the book where Virgil carries Dante like a father or mother would carry a child. He is a stern authority when authority is needed—he is always alert and ready to provide the right correction and guidance. Dante stops battling with Virgil completely in the second half of the book; he is completely trusting. The two are so tuned into each other that Virgil can practically read Dante's mind. Some critics have suggested that he actually does read Dante's mind, but I think that is a misreading, myself. It's just that Virgil is so *intelligent*; he's always one step ahead of Dante, able to anticipate his problems, guess his apprehensions. On one level, he personifies Reason, remember. It is very poignant when, in the ninth circle, Virgil steps back and you hardly hear from him. The pupil has learned the lesson so well that he can travel through the deepest most horrible section of Hell and leave his pity behind (way behind, we see). Dante proves, by the time they leave the ninth circle, that he's learned what he needs to know about the

nature of sin, and the nature of sinners, and he's ready to take on the next stage of his journey. As observant readers, we know Virgil's calm example, his poise and his intelligence, have been a big part of Dante's success. Dante never would have made it out of the woods without Virgil. There's a poignant scene in which Dante recalls that scene in the dark woods when Virgil came to rescue him; he remembers Virgil's "sweet face."

Imaginary worlds and their "truth"

Back in Canto XVI, Dante is about to describe Geryon, and he says:

"A man should close his lips, if he's able to,
When faced by truth that has the face of lies,
But here I cannot be silent; reader, I vow
By my *Commedia's* ines—so may they not fail..."

He goes on to describe the fantastic monster, Geryon. Why this elaborate prelude?

Why this justification that what seems like a "lie" is actually "true"?

Again in Canto 32, he urges himself not let words "diverge from fact." What can Dante mean when he insists his story is true, despite the fact that everyone immediately knows it is a "fiction." How is it both "fictional" and "true"? If it isn't true in its surface details—these are fictional characters (no matter how "real") in a fictional setting (no matter how "believable")—what exactly is true about it? What "truth" can it tell? Does it tell the truth?

This gets to the heart of what literature has to offer in its deepest sense—a form of truth, artistic truth. Although the details of the fictional journey might not be "literally" true in the sense that Minos and Geryon and Lucifer and the rest obviously do not "exist," the journey, along with its vivid cast of characters, *is* "true" allegorically, symbolically, metaphorically. Dante declares that the truth need not reside on the literal level; the poetic image, the metaphor, can convey allegorical, symbolic truth which is equally valid, equally worthwhile. It's what the metaphor suggests about the nature of ourselves and our world that we respond to as "true." In that sense, we might decide Genesis is "true," although we might not believe in a literal "Garden" and a literal "Adam and Eve." This is the same decision we make (about truth) whether we're reading about a fantastic, alternate world like the Inferno or a very realistic world like the one Tim O'Brien evokes in his Vietnam masterpiece, *The Things They Carried*. Great literature, by providing us with provocative poetic images make us feel, make us think, make us imagine, is always an invitation to truth: the truth about the very things we think of as "human."