

from
THE DIVINE COMEDY
about 1310–1314

Dante Alighieri

Dante Alighieri was one of the greatest poets of 14th-century Europe. In Dante's masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*, the Italian poet imagines himself on a journey through the levels of Hell and then Heaven. In the following excerpt, Dante and his guide, the ancient poet Virgil, arrive at the Gate of Hell. They read the inscription above the gate and then walk into Hell's vestibule, or entrance hall, where they see the tormented souls who are unfit for Heaven.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Making Inferences

What can you infer about Dante's beliefs about how people should live their lives in order to go to Heaven and avoid Hell?

The Vestibule of Hell: The Opportunists

I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE.
130 I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN PEOPLE.
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL SORROW.

SACRED JUSTICE MOVED MY ARCHITECT.
I WAS RAISED HERE BY DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE,
PRIMORDIAL LOVE AND ULTIMATE INTELLECT.

135 ONLY THOSE ELEMENTS TIME CANNOT WEAR
WERE MADE BEFORE ME, AND BEYOND TIME I STAND.
ABANDON ALL HOPE YE WHO ENTER HERE.

These mysteries I read cut into stone
above a gate. And turning I said: "Master,
140 what is the meaning of this harsh inscription?"

And he then as initiate to novice:
"Here must you put by all division of spirit
and gather your soul against all cowardice.

This is the place I told you to expect.

145 Here you shall pass among the fallen people,
souls who have lost the good of intellect.”¹

So saying, he put forth his hand to me,
and with a gentle and encouraging smile
he led me through the gate of mystery.

150 Here sighs and cries and wails coiled and recoiled
on the starless air, spilling my soul to tears.
A confusion of tongues and monstrous accents toiled

in pain and anger. Voices hoarse and shrill
and sounds of blows, all intermingled, raised
155 tumult and pandemonium that still

whirls on the air forever dirty with it
as if a whirlwind sucked at sand. And I,
holding my head in horror, cried: “Sweet Spirit,

what souls are these who run through this black haze?”
160 And he to me: “These are the nearly soulless
whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise.”²

They are mixed here with that despicable corps
of angels who were neither for God nor Satan,
but only for themselves. The High Creator

165 scourged them from Heaven for its perfect beauty,
and Hell will not receive them since the wicked
might feel some glory over them.” And I:

“Master, what gnaws at them so hideously
their lamentation stuns the very air?”

170 “They have no hope of death,” he answered me,

“and in their blind and unattaining state
their miserable lives have sunk so low
that they must envy every other fate.

No word of them survives their living season.

175 Mercy and Justice deny them even a name.
Let us not speak of them: look, and pass on.”

1. souls who have lost the good of intellect: people who have lost sight of God

2. whose lives concluded neither blame nor praise: people who acted neither for good nor evil but only for themselves in life

I saw a banner there upon the mist.
Circling and circling, it seemed to scorn all pause.
So it ran on, and still behind it pressed

180 a never-ending rout of souls in pain.
I had not thought death had undone so many
as passed before me in that mournful train.

And some I knew among them; last of all
I recognized the shadow of that soul
185 who, in his cowardice, made the Great Denial.

At once I understood for certain: these
were of that retrograde and faithless crew
hateful to God and to His enemies.

These wretches never born and never dead
190 ran naked in a swarm of wasps and hornets
that goaded them the more the more they fled,

and made their faces stream with bloody gouts
of pus and tears that dribbled to their feet
to be swallowed there by loathsome worms and maggots.

195 Then looking onward I made out a throng
assembled on the beach of a wide river,
whereupon I turned to him: "Master, I long

to know what souls these are, and what strange usage
makes them as eager to cross as they seem to be
200 in this infected light." At which the Sage:

"All this shall be made known to you when we stand
on the joyless beach of Acheron."³ And I
cast down my eyes, sensing a reprimand

in what he said, and so walked at his side
205 in silence and ashamed until we came
through the dead cavern to that sunless tide.

There, steering toward us in an ancient ferry
came an old man with a white bush of hair,
bellowing: "Woe to you depraved souls! Bury

3. **Acheron:** a river in Hell that serves as its outer boundary

210 Here and forever all hope of Paradise:
I come to lead you to the other shore,
into eternal dark, into fire and ice.

And you who are living yet, I say begone
from these who are dead.” But when he saw me stand
215 against his violence he began again:

“By other windings and by other steerage
shall you cross to that other shore. Not here! Not here!
A lighter craft than mine must give you passage.”

And my Guide to him: “Charon,⁴ bite back your spleen:
220 this has been willed where what is willed must be,
and is not yours to ask what it may mean.”

The steersman of that marsh of ruined souls,
who wore a wheel of flame around each eye,
stifled the rage that shook his woolly jowls.

225 But those unmanned and naked spirits there
turned pale with fear and their teeth began to chatter
at the sound of his crude bellow. In despair

they blasphemed God, their parents, their time on earth,
the race of Adam, and the day and the hour
230 and the place and the seed and the womb that gave them birth.

But all together they drew to that grim shore
where all must come who lose the fear of God.
Weeping and cursing they come for evermore,

and demon Charon with eyes like burning coals
235 herds them in, and with a whistling oar
flails on the stragglers to his wake of souls.

As leaves in autumn loosen and stream down
until the branch stands bare above its tatters
spread on the rustling ground, so one by one
240 the evil seed of Adam in its Fall
cast themselves, at his signal, from the shore
and streamed away like birds who hear their call.

4. **Charon:** the boatman of the dead

So they are gone over that shadowy water,
and always before they reach the other shore
245 a new noise stirs on this, and new throngs gather.

“My son,” the courteous Master said to me,
“all who die in the shadow of God’s wrath
converge to this from every clime and country.

And all pass over eagerly, for here
250 Divine Justice transforms and spurs them so
their dread turns wish: they yearn for what they fear.

No soul in Grace⁵ comes ever to this crossing;
therefore if Charon rages at your presence
you will understand the reason for his cursing.”

255 When he had spoken, all the twilight country
shook so violently, the terror of it
bathes me with sweat even in memory:

the tear-soaked ground gave out a sigh of wind
that spewed itself in flame on a red sky,
260 and all my shattered senses left me. Blind,

like one whom sleep comes over in a swoon,
I stumbled into darkness and went down.

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5. **Grace:** those in God’s favor

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

Answers will vary. Students may infer that Dante believed that people must never lose sight of God and that they must act for the good of others.