

Canto V

Circle Two: *The Carnal*

The Poets leave Limbo and enter the SECOND CIRCLE. Here begin the torments of Hell proper, and here, blocking the way, sits MINOS,¹ the dread and semi-bestial judge of the damned who assigns to each soul its eternal torment. He orders the Poets back; but Virgil silences him as he earlier silenced Charon, and the Poets move on.

They find themselves on a dark ledge swept by a great whirlwind, which spins within it the souls of the CARNAL, those who betrayed reason to their appetites. Their sin was to abandon themselves to the tempest of their passions: so they are swept forever in the tempest of Hell, forever denied the light of reason and of God. Virgil identifies many among them.² SEMIRAMIS is there, and DIDO, CLEOPATRA, HELEN, ACHILLES, PARIS, and TRISTAN. Dante sees PAOLO and FRANCESCA swept together, and in the name of love he calls to them to tell their sad story. They pause from their eternal flight to come to him, and Francesca tells their history while Paolo weeps at her side. Dante is so stricken by compassion at their tragic tale that he swoons once again.

1. **MINOS** (mī' nās'): Like all the monsters Dante assigns to the various offices of Hell, Minos is drawn from classical mythology. He was the son of Europa and of Zeus who descended to her in the form of a bull. Minos became a mythological king of Crete, so famous for his wisdom and justice that after death his soul was made judge of the dead. In the *Aeneid*, Virgil presents him fulfilling the same office at Aeneas' descent to the underworld. Dante, however, transforms him into an irate and hideous monster with a tail.

2. **many among them**: The following are famous lovers from legend and history. They are identified more fully in the notes to this canto. Their names are pronounced as follows: Semiramis (si mir' ə mis); Dido (dī' dō); Cleopatra (klē' ō pa' trə); Achilles (ə kil' ēz); Tristan (tris' tən); Paolo (pā' ō lō); Francesca (frān chā' skə).

So we went down to the second ledge alone;
a smaller circle³ of so much greater pain
the voice of the damned rose in a bestial moan.

5 There Minos sits, grinning, grotesque, and hale.⁴
He examines each lost soul as it arrives
and delivers his verdict with his coiling tail.

That is to say, when the ill-fated soul
appears before him it confesses all,⁵
10 and that grim sorter of the dark and foul

decides which place in Hell shall be its end,
then wraps his twitching tail about himself
one coil for each degree it must descend.

The soul descends and others take its place:
15 each crowds in its turn to judgment, each
confesses,
each hears its doom and falls away through space.

“O you who come into this camp of woe,”
cried Minos when he saw me turn away
without awaiting his judgment, “watch where
you go

20 once you have entered here, and to whom you
turn!

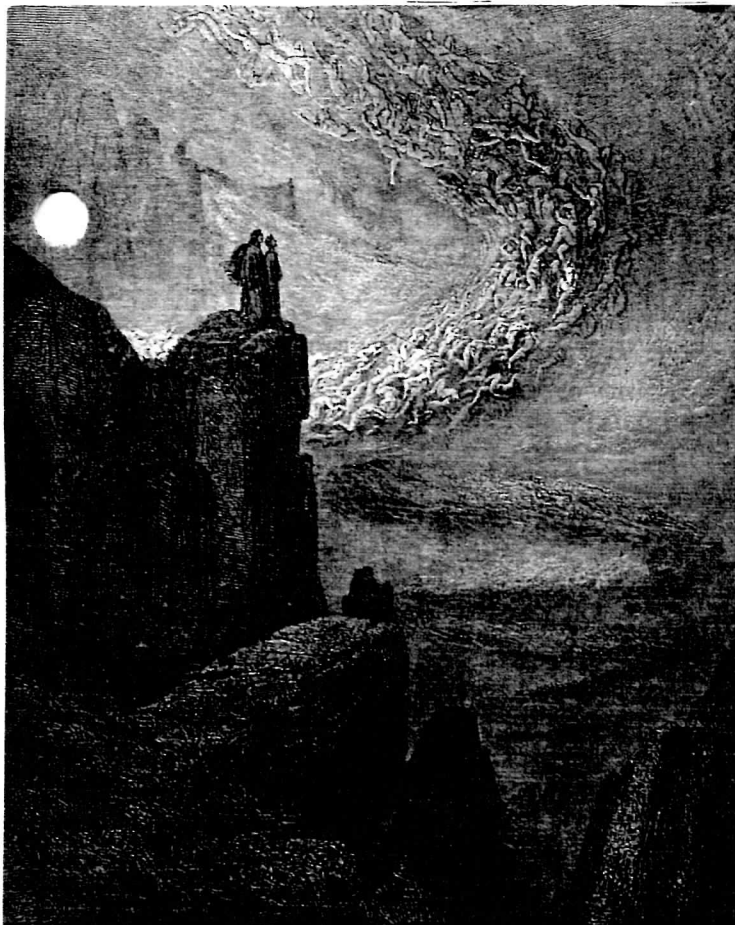
Do not be misled by that wide and easy
passage!”

And my Guide to him: “That is not your concern;

3. **a smaller circle**: The pit of Hell tapers like a funnel. The circles of ledges accordingly grow smaller as they descend.

4. **hale** (hāl): Healthy.

5. **it confesses all**: Just as the souls appeared eager to cross Acheron, so they are eager to confess even while they are filled with dread. Dante is once again making the point that sinners elect their Hell by an act of their own will.



THE LUSTFUL, INFERNO V
Gustave Doré

it is his fate to enter every door.

This has been willed where what is willed must be,
and is not yours to question. Say no more.”

25 Now the choir of anguish, like a wound,
strikes through the tortured air. Now I have
come
to Hell’s full lamentation,⁶ sound beyond sound.

I came to a place stripped bare of every light
and roaring on the naked dark like seas
30 wracked by a war of winds. Their hellish flight

of storm and counterstorm through time
foregone,
sweeps the souls of the damned before its
charge.
Whirling and battering it drives them on,

6. **Hell’s full lamentation:** It is with the second circle that the real tortures of Hell begin.

and when they pass the ruined gap of Hell⁷
through which we had come, their shrieks begin
35 anew.
There they blaspheme the power of God eternal.

And this, I learned, was the never ending flight
of those who sinned in the flesh,⁸ the carnal and
lusty
who betrayed reason to their appetite.

40 As the wings of wintering starlings bear them on
in their great wheeling flights, just so the blast
wherries⁹ these evil souls through time
foregone.

Here, there, up, down, they whirl and, whirling,
strain
with never a hope of hope to comfort them,
45 not of release, but even of less pain.

As cranes go over sounding their harsh cry,
leaving the long streak of their flight in air,
so come these spirits, wailing as they fly.

And watching their shadows lashed by wind, I cried:
50 “Master, what souls are these the very air
lashes with its black whips from side to side?”

“The first of these whose history you would know,”
he answered me, “was Empress of many tongues.¹⁰
55 Mad sensuality corrupted her so

7. **the ruined gap of hell:** At the time of the Harrowing of Hell a great earthquake shook the underworld, shattering rocks and cliffs. Ruins resulting from the same shock are noted in Canto XII, 34, and Canto XXI, 112ff. At the beginning of Canto XXIV, the Poets leave the *bolgia*—an Italian word meaning “ditch”—of the Hypocrites by climbing the ruined slabs of a bridge that was shattered by this earthquake.

8. **those who sinned in the flesh:** Here begin the punishments for the various sins of Incontinence (the sins of the She-Wolf). In the second circle are punished those who sinned by excess of sexual passion. Since this is the most natural sin and the sin most nearly associated with love, its punishment is the lightest of all to be found in Hell proper. The Carnal are whirled and buffeted endlessly through the murky air (symbolic of the beclouding of their reason by passion) by a great gale (symbolic of their lust).

9. **wherries** (hwer’ ēz): Transports.

10. **Empress of many tongues:** Semiramis, a legendary queen of Assyria who assumed full power at the death of her husband, Ninus (nī’ nəs).

that to hide the guilt of her debauchery¹¹
she licensed all depravity alike,
and lust and law were one in her decree.

60 She is Semiramis of whom the tale is told
how she married Ninus and succeeded him
to the throne of that wide land the Sultans hold.

The other is Dido;¹² faithless to the ashes
of Sichaeus, she killed herself for love.
The next whom the eternal tempest lashes

is sense-drugged Cleopatra. See Helen¹³ there,
65 from whom such ill arose. And great Achilles,¹⁴
who fought at last with love in the house of
prayer,

And Paris. And Tristan.¹⁵ As they whirled above
he pointed out more than a thousand shades
of those torn from the mortal life by love.

70 I stood there while my Teacher one by one
named the great knights and ladies of dim time;
and I was swept by pity and confusion.

At last I spoke: "Poet, I should be glad
to speak a word with those two swept together¹⁶
75 so lightly on the wind and still so sad."

And he to me: "Watch them. When next they
pass,
call to them in the name of love that drives
and damns them here. In that name they will
pause."

Thus, as soon as the wind in its wild course
brought them around, I called: "O wearied
80 souls!
if none forbid it, pause and speak to us."

As mating doves that love calls to their nest
glide through the air with motionless raised
wings,
borne by the sweet desire that fills each breast—

85 Just so those spirits turned on the torn sky
from the band where Dido whirls across the air;
such was the power of pity in my cry.

"O living creature, gracious, kind, and good,
going this pilgrimage through the sick night,
90 visiting us who stained the earth with blood,

were the King of Time our friend, we would pray
His peace
on you who have pitied us. As long as the wind
will let us pause, ask of us what you please.

11. **debauchery** (dē bōch' ə rē): Indulgence in sensual pleasure.

12. **Dido**: Queen and founder of Carthage, an ancient kingdom in northern Africa. She had vowed to remain faithful to her husband, Sichaeus (sə kē' əs), but she fell in love with Aeneas. When Aeneas abandoned her she stabbed herself on a funeral pyre she had had prepared.

According to Dante's own system of punishments, she should be in the Seventh Circle (Canto XIII) with the suicides. The only clue Dante gives to the tempering of her punishment is his statement that "she killed herself for love." Dante always seems readiest to forgive in that name.

13. **Cleopatra . . . Helen**: Cleopatra was a queen of Egypt (51–49; 48–30 B.C.), and the mistress of the powerful Romans Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Helen was the beautiful wife of the King of Sparta. According to legend, the Trojan War was started when she was forcibly taken away to Troy by Paris, a son of the Trojan king, Priam.

14. **Achilles**: He was the greatest warrior on the Greek side during the Trojan War. Achilles is placed among this company because of his passion for Polyxena (pō lik' sə nə), the daughter of Priam. For love of her, he agreed to desert the Greeks and to join the Trojans, but when he went to the temple for the wedding (according to the legend Dante has followed) he was killed by Paris.

15. **Tristan**: A knight sent to Ireland by King Mark of Cornwall to bring back the princess Isolde (i sōl' də) to be the king's bride. Isolde and Tristan fell in love and tragically died together.

16. **those two swept together**: Paolo and Francesca. Dante's treatment of these two lovers is certainly the tenderest and most sympathetic accorded any of the sinners in Hell, and legends immediately began to grow about this pair.

The facts are these. In 1275 Giovanni Malatesta, (jō vā' nē māl ə te' stā) of Rimini, called Giovanni the Lamé, a somewhat deformed but brave and powerful warrior, made a political marriage with Francesca, daughter of Guido da Polenta (gwē' dō də pō len' tā) of Ravenna. Francesca came to Rimini and there an amour grew between her and Giovanni's younger brother Paolo. Despite the fact that Paolo had married in 1269 and had become the father of two daughters by 1275, his affair with Francesca continued for many years. It was sometime between 1283 and 1286 that Giovanni surprised them in Francesca's bedroom and killed both of them.

The town where I was born lies by the shore
95 where the Po¹⁷ descends into its ocean rest
with its attendant streams in one long murmur.

Love, which in gentlest hearts will soonest bloom
seized my lover with passion for that sweet body
from which I was torn unshriven¹⁸ to my doom.

100 Love, which permits no loved one not to love,
took me so strongly with delight in him
that we are one in Hell, as we were above.¹⁹

Love led us to one death. In the depths of Hell
Caïna waits for him²⁰ who took our lives.”
105 This was the piteous tale they stopped to tell.

And when I had heard those world-offended
lovers
I bowed my head. At last the Poet spoke:
“What painful thoughts are these your lowered
brow covers?”

When at length I answered, I began: “Alas!
110 What sweetest thoughts, what green and young
desire
led these two lovers to this sorry pass.”

Then turning to those spirits once again,
I said: “Francesca, what you suffer here
melts me to tears of pity and of pain.

115 But tell me: in the time of your sweet sighs
by what appearances found love the way
to lure you to his perilous paradise?”

17. **Po** (pō): A river of northern Italy.

18. **unshriven**: Unconfessed and so with her sin unforgiven.

19. **that we . . . above**: At many points of the *Inferno* Dante makes clear the principle that the souls of the damned are locked so blindly into their own guilt that none can feel sympathy for another, or find any pleasure in the presence of another. The temptation of many readers is to interpret this line romantically: i.e., that the love of Paolo and Francesca survives Hell itself. The more Dantean interpretation, however, is that they add to one another’s anguish (a) as mutual reminders of their sin, and (b) as insubstantial shades of the bodies for which they once felt such great passion.

20. **Caïna . . . him**: Giovanni Malatesta was still alive at the writing. His fate is already decided, however, and upon his death, his soul will fall to Caïna, the first ring of the last circle (Canto XXXII), where lie those who performed acts of treachery against their kin.

And she: “The double grief of a lost bliss
is to recall its happy hour in pain.
120 Your Guide and Teacher knows the truth of this.

But if there is indeed a soul in Hell
to ask of the beginning of our love
out of his pity, I will weep and tell:

On a day for dalliance we read the rhyme
125 of Lancelot,²¹ how love had mastered him.
We were alone with innocence and dim time.²²

Pause after pause that high old story drew
our eyes together while we blushed and paled;
but it was one soft passage overthrew

130 our caution and our hearts. For when we read
how her fond smile was kissed by such a lover,
he who is one with me alive and dead

breathed on my lips the tremor of his kiss.

That book, and he who wrote it, was a pander.²³
135 That day we read no further.” As she said this,

the other spirit, who stood by her, wept
so piteously, I felt my senses reel
and faint away with anguish. I was swept

by such a swoon as death is, and I fell,
140 as a corpse might fall, to the dead floor of Hell.

21. **the rhyme . . . Lancelot**: The story exists in many forms. The details Dante makes use of are from an Old French version.

22. **dim time**: The olden time depicted in the Lancelot story. This phrase was added by the translator; the original reads, “We were alone, suspecting nothing.”

23. **That book . . . pander**: *Galeotto*, the Italian word for “pander,” is also the Italian rendering of the name of Gallehault, who in the French Romance Dante refers to here, urged Lancelot and Guinevere on to love. A pander is a go-between in a love affair.

Reader’s Response *Do you admire people who throw caution to the wind or people who show a tendency to do everything in moderation? Explain your answer.*

THINKING ABOUT THE SELECTION

Clarifying

1. (a) Describe the creature that guards this circle of Hell. (b) Explain how he indicates his judgment.
2. List as many of the people named by Virgil as inhabiting this circle as you can remember.
3. (a) Where is the person who killed Paolo and Francesca going to go when he dies? (b) Why?

Interpreting

4. Interpret Virgil's remark, "It is his fate to enter every door." Explain its literal and figurative meanings.
5. Why are the lustful blown about by the wind?
6. What is the truth behind Francesca's statement, "The double grief of a lost bliss / is to recall its happy hour in pain"?
7. Why does Dante feel sympathy for the sinners?

Applying

8. Often, people do things that might seem quite harmless but in fact cause great harm to others. Which is more important, the mistake itself, or the result of that error? For example, is it wrong to cheat on a test or lie on a college application even if no one gets hurt? How would you argue the two different views of this issue?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

Evaluating First-Person Point of View

Canto V contains a tale within a tale, and both are related in the first person. As Francesca tells her story, she draws the pilgrim into the tragedy that has befallen her. She captures his sympathy immediately by addressing him as "gracious, kind, and good" and invokes God to show her gratitude to him. Her repetition of the word *love* and her description of this emotion as a noble sentiment render her argument all the more convincing. The pilgrim is immediately touched and anguished. Francesca continues her story by speaking of herself as a courtly, innocent girl. She never directly speaks of her transgression and leaves the listener and reader to think that she is unjustly punished. Thus the poet shows us the danger of the same language he himself uses. Anyone may mislead others by omitting certain details and emphasizing others. Here the reader learns to distrust the first-person narrative that has previously engaged his or her sympathy.

1. (a) How do you think Paolo might tell this story? (b) Would he choose the same details? Explain.

2. (a) What impression do you form of Francesca? (b) What impression do you form of Paolo?
3. Imagine that you are a prosecuting attorney. How might the impression you create of Paolo and Francesca be different from that in Francesca's story?

CRITICAL THINKING AND READING

Comparing and Contrasting Judgments

A **judgment** is a conclusion you reach after examining the facts. Virgil, the voice of reason in this canto, judges the lustful much more harshly than does his disciple, Dante. He points out clearly how their own behavior brought about their downfall and caused their condemnation to this circle of Hell. His language is harsh, direct, and concise: "The other is Dido; faithless to the ashes / of Sichaeus, she killed herself for love."

1. How does Virgil judge Paolo and Francesca?
2. How does Dante judge Paolo and Francesca?
3. Which judgment do you think Dante the poet wants you to agree with? Explain.

UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE

Examining Latin Roots

Many words in English share Latin roots. Canto V deals with the punishment of the souls of the carnal, people who have committed sins of the flesh. The English word *carnal* is based on the Latin word *carnalis*, meaning fleshly as opposed to spiritual. The root is *carn*, which gives us many other English words.

Find the meaning of each of the following words.

Explain how each relates to *carnalis*.

- | | |
|----------------|--------------|
| a. carnal | d. carnival |
| b. carnivore | e. incarnate |
| c. carnivorous | |

THINKING AND WRITING

Writing from Another Point of View

Imagine that Virgil is traveling through Hell alone and encounters Paolo and Francesca. How would his conversation with them be different from Dante's? If you were Virgil, what would you say? Look over what Virgil does say in the fifth Canto; compare his language and his tone to those of Dante. Then in four paragraphs retell the story from Virgil's point of view. As you revise, compare your language to Virgil's and be sure you have maintained a consistent point of view.

GUIDE FOR INTERPRETING

from the Inferno, Canto V

Commentary

Point of View. Every narrative is written from a particular perspective known as the **point of view**. Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy* in the first person in order to underscore the personal nature of his literary pilgrimage and in order to establish a bond with the reader. As he marvels at the sights and situations around him, the reader sees these events and images through his eyes, and to some extent accepts his judgments.

In fact, though, the Dante of the *Divine Comedy* is really a literary character created to express the judgments and opinions of Dante the poet. Dante the poet is writing from the point of view of a man who has already made his spiritual journey and who has reached certain conclusions. He must now persuade his reader to follow him on that journey by means of a sympathetic version of himself and by an intriguing narrative. For example, it is Dante the poet who has consigned Boniface VIII to the lowest depths of Hell, even though Boniface is not even dead. Dante the character/voyager merely inquires of Virgil why there is a place reserved for Boniface in Hell and thus is far more innocent and harmless than the poet himself. Dante the poet condemns Paolo and Francesca, the adulterers, to Hell, while Dante the voyager feels great pity for them when he hears their story. At first Dante the poet depicts the illicit lovers as merely part of a great number of lustful people, compared to flocks of birds. This initial image recalls the description in Canto III of the indecisive and has the effect of depersonalizing and dehumanizing these people. At this point the punishment is emphasized. But when Dante addresses the lovers and they answer eloquently, the pilgrim and, through him, the reader are moved to sympathy. So the reader is drawn into the tension between condemnation of sin and the desire to spare others from suffering. This tension is just the first step in a long lesson about the necessity of suffering in the presence of sin.

Writing

The sinners in Circle Two of Hell are denied the pure light of reason. The Greek philosopher Aristotle called reason "That by which the soul thinks and judges," while the Roman writer Cicero called it "The light and lamp of life." Freewrite, exploring your own definition of reason.