

European Literature

Dante's *Inferno*

Fall 2020

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Unit Goals:

We will begin the school year with Dante's *Inferno*, an ideal text to further your work of reading with depth. The class will provide you with a toolbox so that whatever text you encounter in the future, whether a novel or a political speech, you will know which tools to use to discover its multiple meanings and ideas. With *The Inferno*, we will closely read its passages at the word level focusing on how repetition, allusions and diction charge the text with meaning. We will first examine the motif of contrapasso, how the detailed imagery of each punishment symbolizes aspects of the souls' past lives and current condition and then the motif of how a person's language reveals his character, even the parts that he is not aware of--what isn't said is often as important as what is. A primary goal of the course, starting with this unit, is that you become so adept at reading literature that you'll transfer these skills to reading elsewhere with depth. As you continue to listen to politicians, to media, to the people around you, to yourselves, you should use the same skills of literary analysis to think about what is truly being said and what techniques are used to persuade.

However, we will also frequently step back and look at the forest rather than individual trees. We cannot be so caught up with close reading that we neglect exploring the great questions that the texts ask or listening to the concerns that our authors raise. Many challenges we face today first emerged or were also experienced by medieval and early modern Europe: the separation of church and state, factionalism and the breakdown of community due to increasing polarization. We want to examine what the literature of this time has to say to us about the effects of questioning core belief systems, an orientation towards self, what constitutes evil, goodness, love; beginning with *The Inferno*, followed by *Crime and Punishment* and *Hamlet*, they ask questions that still resonate deeply: "What is goodness? What is evil? What forms the direction of our souls? What creates community or disconnection and isolation? How do/should people respond to suffering? What causes resilience? Can people truly change, and if so, how does that happen--what is needed? Where are meaning and purpose found? What is the role of art? Who is God? Only after we do the hard work of understanding what these texts are truly saying and why their authors came to their conclusions can we genuinely dialogue with them. I am excited to see the intersection between these works and your minds and hearts and look forward to learning from all of you. We have a lot of work to do this year!

Office Hours:

Tuesdays, 3-4pm, Wednesdays, 3-4pm, and other times by appointment. Please make frequent use of my office hours. We should conference over ideas and outlines for your papers along with drafts of your essays.

Graded Assignments:

- **Daily reading quizzes** count 15% of your grade.
- **First short essay: Comparison of the Opening 9 lines of Two Translations** (roughly 2-3 pages), due in class on September 13. From the packet of *The Inferno*'s first three tercets by translators Pinsky, Bergin, Norton, Binyon and Musa, choose two of the translations to compare. In each body paragraph, examine a pair of corresponding lines, analyzing each translator's diction carefully. What are the differences between the choice of verbs, adjectives or nouns and consequently, the differences in connotations and overall meaning behind each translator's choice? Some words may even have Biblical connotations or serve as allusions while others do not. The essay counts 15% of your overall grade.
- **Second short essay: Analysis of Francesca's Speech** (roughly 2-3 pages), due in class on September 20. After analyzing together the diction of Canto 5, lines 88-102 in class, on your own, analyze Francesca's language in lines 103-108 and 121-138. Examine her use of diction, repetition, allusions and imagery. What do they reveal about her character? How do they demonstrate her lustfulness and refusal to take responsibility for her actions? The essay counts 15% of your overall grade.
- **Third short essay: Essay on your Canto** (roughly 3-4 pages) on your assigned canto, due in class on October 7. The essay should argue a thesis of your choice about the canto you and your partner have researched and prepared to present. Possible topics to choose from and explore: contrapasso, the central imagery of the canto and its significance, the language of the sinner revealing character, Dante's treatment of the sinners compared to that in previous cantos, Dante's change in his relationship with Virgil, similarities and differences between Dante and the sinners, etc. The essay counts 20% of your overall grade.
- **Fourth short essay: Create Your Own Canto in the Style of Dante** (roughly 3-4 pages), due in class on October 14. The paper should include both contrapasso and language from the sinner that matches his sin. The essay counts 15% of your overall grade.
- **In class oral presentation: on your assigned canto** (50 minutes), due in class according to the presentation schedule. The presentation counts 25% of your overall grade. Possible topics to choose from and explore: contrapasso, the central imagery of the canto and its significance, the language of the sinner revealing character, Dante's treatment of the sinners compared to that in previous cantos, Dante's change in his relationship with Virgil, similarities and differences between Dante and the sinners, etc.
- **Class participation** counts 10% of your overall grade.

Course Guidelines:

- **Rewrites of papers are allowed** only after the first draft is conferenced over with me.
- **Late assignments are marked down** ½ grade per class

- *All quotations AND paraphrases whether from printed or electronic sources must be identified with appropriate source citations MLA style.*
- *Be careful using the web to avoid the plagiarism of ideas.* Your first two short language analysis essays should not use any sources outside of your own brain. Most of the topics suggested for your third essay probably do not require outside research.

Required Texts

Primary Source

Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy Volume I: Inferno*, translated by Mark Musa (Penguin Books, 2003)

Reading Packet

A few required cantos from *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* will be passed out to you.

Course Schedule and Reading Assignments:

Every student must read the required reading for each class to be prepared for discussions and to write well informed essays. Lectures and discussions will presume familiarity with the material, and assigned essays and presentations will test your understanding of it.

September 7: Introduction of *The Inferno's* structure

Required Reading: Cantos 1-2

September 8: Dante's Physical and Spiritual Landscape

Required Reading: Canto 3

September 9: Epic Simile Analysis and The Outskirts of *The Inferno*

Required Reading: Cantos 4-5

September 10: The Spiritual Landscape, Contrapasso and the Virtuous Pagans

Required Reading: Cantos 6-7

September 13: The Lustful and the Gluttonous, Contrapasso and Language Reveals Character

Assignment Due First Essay (apx. 2-3 pages) Comparison of Two Translations
Required Reading: Cantos 8-9

September 14: Wasting and Hoarding, Contrapasso

Required Reading: Canto 10

September 15: The Heretics, Language Reveals Character and Contrapasso

Required Reading: Cantos 11-12

September 16: Introduction to Circles of Violence, the Structure of *The Inferno*, Contrapasso

Required Reading: Cantos 13-14

September 17: The Woods of Suicide, Contrapasso, Language Reveals Character, The Sinner as a Foil to Dante

September 20: Introduction to the Dante Teaching Presentation and Preparation Methodology

Assignment Due: 2nd Essay (apx. 2-3 pages)

Required Reading: Assigned Canto for Teaching Presentation

September 21: Presentation Preparation

September 22: Presentation Preparation

September 23: Presentation Preparation

September 24: Presentation Preparation

Required Reading: Canto 15

September 27: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 15

Required Reading: Canto 18

September 28: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 18

Required Reading: Canto 19

September 29: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 19

Required Reading: Canto 23

September 30: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 23

Required Reading: Canto 26

October 1: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 26

Required Reading: Canto 27

October 4: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 27

Required Reading: Canto 32

October 5: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 32

Required Reading: Canto 33

October 6: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 33

Required Reading: Canto 34

October 7: Student Teaching Presentation on Canto 34

Assignment Due: Third Essay (3-4 pages) on Canto Taught

Required Reading: *Purgatorio*, Cantos 10-11

October 8: Purgatorio as Rehabilitation, Allusions, Contrapasso and Language Reveals Character

Required Reading: *Paradiso*, Cantos 19-20

October 11: Paradiso, Dante's Vision of Community, Grappling with Theology

October 12: Introduction to the Creative Canto Assignment

October 13: Reflection on Dante's View of "What is Evil? What is Goodness? What Forms a Person's Soul or Identities?" and Writing Workshop

October 14: Sharing Aloud Creative Cantos in Community

Required Reading: *Crime and Punishment*, Chapters 1-4