

# Dantes changing attitude toward the sinners essay



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Dante's *Inferno* opens with Dante being lost in the woods. Confused, afraid, and alone, he stumbles through the forest, where he encounters the spirit of Virgil, who was sent by the Virgin Mary upon seeing his unfortunate plight. Virgil persuades Dante to go with him through Hell, but Dante is unsure. Virgil cannot make him go, for Dante has to be willing. Dante is persuaded, but then he suddenly "unwishes his wishes / full of afterthoughts / [Dante] held back on the dark slope (Dante)." This line, presented at the start of Canto II, paints a vivid portrait of Dante.

He is shown to be weak, vacillating, and unable to make up his mind. He shows fear and lack of faith in the Divine Powers, all of which eventually lead to build on one main theme of the poem, that of the "strife of pity (Esch 1)." Throughout his journey to the underworld, Dante is seen struggling with himself between pity and sympathy for the sinners he encounters. However, it is not so much a pity for the scenes he experiences as much as it is a pity for himself. Here he is in hell, where he has been told to "abandon hope / ye who enter here. (Dante)."

Divine justice - fair and unequivocal - stares him in the face. Eventually, he realizes that he will face judgment and possibly even punishment like the sinners he encountered. Hence, his pity is actually an exhortation to become accountable for his actions. Virgil becomes Dante's spiritual guide as he descends down the portals of hell. At first, it appears as a typical student/master scenario, that together they "share one will." When Dante reads the inscription upon the gates of hell, Virgil extends "a reassuring glance and led [him] by the hand through the gate toward the mysteries beyond."

Virgil wants Dante to see Hell as it really is - a place for Divine Justice (Esch 3). The only way for Dante to do that is to overcome his pity and becoming like his guide. An irony, however, is presented in Canto IV. Dante assumes Virgil is "scared stiff," as "his color was ash, deathly pale." Dante believes that Virgil was afraid, and Virgil is hurt by this insinuation. However, what Virgil was really feeling was that he was feeling pity for himself, as he was sent to spend eternity in limbo. Virgil all this time was keen on asking Dante to leave behind his pity, yet he himself is feeling it.

This foreshadows the later breakdown of the student/master relationship. As they continue their descent, Dante experiences various states of pity. However, in Canto VIII, Virgil interacts with a sinner, Argenti, for the first time. Dante here does not feel anymore pity. Instead, he seems to be enjoying his meeting, observing Argenti as he is in the throes of suffering. But his victory over his emotions here is short-lived. In Canto XX, Dante still breaks down, getting him a rebuke from Virgil, who asks him whether he was "still a fool...will [he] feel pity instead of piety?"

The student/master relationship finally breaks down, and as the Canto progressed, shows how Dante assumes a "cavalier way" in dismissing Virgil's lesson on the Mantua (Grimm 87). Dante, proud as he is, was terribly hurt by being called a fool by Virgil, yet his position - filled with pity - stopped him from answering Virgil. Finally, in Canto XXXII, Dante accidentally (?) kicks the head of the Bocca. Dante exhibits a side of him he has never shown before - cruel to the point of being inhuman. One way to explain Dante's action is to closely examine the extent of his stay in Hell.

Perhaps, he has already become too insensitive to the plight of the sinners, having seen so many of them in such a short amount of time. Through his journey through Hell, Dante's spiritual enlightenment is guided by Virgil, as well as his own personal courage. Though he was reluctant to even take the first step, Virgil's reassurance helped him in those early, uneasy times.

Because of the help he received, Dante was able to complete his journey to emerge a transformed man, a man who is willing to assume responsibility for his actions.