

The inferno



The Inferno, translated by John Ciardi, is a poem of Dante's immortal drama of a journey through Hell. Sensory imagery is established throughout the poem in the course of Virgil's attempt to aid Dante through the different symbolic retributions that make up the structure of Hell. Virgil is Dante's symbol of all human reason and volunteers to guide him only as far as human reason can go. Sensory imagery helps create the image of events where Virgil assists Dante. He reminds and encourages Dante's courage when he weeps from hearing the cries when they arrive in front of the Gate of Hell.

In Canto IV, Dante is awoken by a monstrous clap of thunder, initially representing the cry of all damned souls as one from the pit of Hell. This event signals to Dante what he is about to face as he journeys along into Hell. Dante has second thoughts when he sees Virgil's pale face but Virgil reassures him that his face is just pale because he feels pity for those who are below them. In the sixth circle they hear a sound as if two continents of air clashed on in a war of winds after dealing with Medusa.

Virgil called for a heavenly messenger to open the gates of Dis because human reason has its limits. The primary example of symbolic retribution is where Dante first hears the terrible noise of unending cries and wails coiled and recoiled on the starless air when he and Virgil enter the Gate of Hell, making Dante shed his own soul of tears. These cries are from the souls of the Opportunists who are uncommitted, neither rebellious against God nor faithful to Satan.

They are punished by being constantly stung into movement, a never-ending rout of souls in pain due to being indecisive in life. Dante responds by crying,

feeling sympathetic for the poor souls because they didn't choose between good and evil but must still be punished. In a while they come to third circle and discover the Gluttons lying in the stinking dirt where they wallow in food and drink. They made no other uses of God's gifts so they lie like garbage in disgusting slush.

Later Dante finds the souls of the Fortune Tellers and Diviners in the eighth circle where he hears them weeping and sees them hideously distorted, for their face was reversed on the neck... staring backwards at their loins. They attempted to look in the future and now are punished by having their heads on backwards and also by walking for eternity backwards. Attempting to know the future is a distortion of God's laws so they are forever deformed. The sensory imagery creates a more intense and imaginative view of the structure of hell.

As Dante descends deeper into Hell, the sensory images become worse and worse. In the first circle, Dante hears sounds of blows, all intermingled with hoarse and shrill voices. These quiet sighs of sadness come from the Virtuous Pagans, ones who were born before Christ. They later reach the inner edge of the sixth circle and have to hide behind the cliff to get used to the foul breath coming from the seventh circle. In the seventh circle they find the Violent against their Neighbors, self-indulgent in blood in life, so they are immersed in the boiling blood, according to the degree of guilt.

In the Canto, Dante approaches the end of all evil, feeling the wild and bitter wind and takes cover behind Virgil's back. This wind comes from the flapping wings of a monstrous creature, Satan, covered chest-down in solid ice and is

the sole origin of all sin. Dante's journey through Hell couldn't have been more imaginative without sensory imagery. From the silent cries of the Opportunists to the cold chill of Satan, nothing makes a journey to Hell more evil and sinful than the use of sensory imagery.