

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS Dante and Virgil enter the second level of Hell. At its gate, sinners are judged by Minos. As you read, look for details that describe this character and how he passes judgment.

Preview Minos judges each sinner to determine his or her proper place in Hell. This level, dark and stormy, is home to the souls of Cleopatra, Helen of Troy, and other illicit lovers. Dante speaks with one of them, Francesca Malatesta, who tells him how she and her brother-in-law Paolo fell in love. Their torment fills Dante with pity, causing him to faint.

CANTO 5



So I descended from first to second circle—
Which girdles a smaller space and greater pain,
Which spurs more lamentation. Minos the dreadful

Snarls at the gate. He examines each one's sin,
5 Judging and disposing as he curls his tail:
That is, when an ill-begotten soul comes down,

It comes before him, and confesses all;
Minos, great connoisseur of sin, discerns
For every spirit its proper place in Hell,

10 And wraps himself in his tail with as many turns
As levels down that shade will have to dwell.
A crowd is always waiting: here each one learns

His judgment and is assigned a place in Hell.
They tell; they hear—and down they all are cast.
15 "You, who have come to sorrow's hospice, think well,"

Said Minos, who at the sight of me had paused
To interrupt his solemn task mid-deed:
"Beware how you come in and whom you trust,

Don't be deceived because the gate is wide."
20 My leader answered, "Must you too scold this way?
His destined path is not for you to impede:

3 **Minos:** In classical mythology, Minos was a wise king of Crete who, after his death, became a judge of the dead in the underworld. Here, Minos is a monster that assigns each soul its proper depth in Hell.

8 **connoisseur:** someone with great knowledge and discriminating taste.

15 **hospice:** inn.

WORDS TO KNOW

discern (dĭ-sŭrn') v. to perceive with the eyes or intellect



Thus is it willed where every thing may be
Because it has been willed. So ask no more."
And now I can hear the notes of agony

25 In sad crescendo beginning to reach my ear;
Now I am where the noise of lamentation
Comes at me in blasts of sorrow. I am where

25 **crescendo**: a gradual but steady increase in sound.

30 All light is mute, with a bellowing like the ocean
Turbulent in a storm of warring winds,
The hurricane of Hell in perpetual motion

28 **mute**: dim.

Sweeping the ravaged spirits as it rends,
Twists, and torments them. Driven as if to land,
They reach the ruin: groaning, tears, laments,

35 And cursing of the power of Heaven. I learned
They suffer here who sinned in carnal things—
Their reason mastered by desire, suborned.

35 **carnal**: having to do with the flesh.

36 **suborned**: led to commit evil acts.

PAUSE & REFLECT How does Minos indicate each sinner's place in Hell?

FOCUS Dante and Virgil look at the spirits of the great lovers. As you read about Francesca and Paolo, try to picture the moment they fall in love.

As winter starlings riding on their wings
Form crowded flocks, so spirits dip and veer
Foundering in the wind's rough buffetings,

40 Upward or downward, driven here and there
With never ease from pain nor hope of rest.
As chanting cranes will form a line in air,

So I saw souls come uttering cries—wind-tossed,
And lofted by the storm. "Master," I cried,
45 "Who are these people, by black air oppressed?"

"First among these you wish to know," he said,
"Was empress of many tongues—she so embraced
Lechery that she decreed it justified

Legally, to evade the scandal of her lust:
50 She is that Semiramis of whom we read,
Successor and wife of Ninus, she possessed

The lands the Sultan rules. Next, she who died
By her own hand for love, and broke her vow
To Sychaeus's ashes. After her comes lewd

55 And wanton Cleopatra. See Helen, too,
Who caused a cycle of many evil years;
And great Achilles, the hero whom love slew

In his last battle. Paris and Tristan are here—"
He pointed out by name a thousand souls
60 Whom love had parted from our life, or more.

When I had heard my teacher tell the rolls
Of knights and ladies of antiquity,
Pity overwhelmed me. Half-lost in its coils,

"Poet," I told him, "I would willingly
65 Speak with those two who move along together,
And seem so light upon the wind." And he:

"When they drift closer—then entreat them hither,
In the name of love that leads them: they will respond."
Soon their course shifted, and the merciless weather

70 Battered them toward us. I called against the wind,
"O wearied souls! If Another does not forbid,
Come speak with us." As doves whom desire has
summoned,

With raised wings steady against the current, glide
Guided by will to the sweetness of their nest,
75 So leaving the flock where Dido was, the two sped

Through the malignant air till they had crossed
To where we stood—so strong was the compulsion
Of my loving call. They spoke across the blast:

50–51 Semiramis (sə-mīr'ə-mīs)...
Ninus (nī'nēs): Semiramis, an
Assyrian queen known widely for
her sexual excesses, took control
after the death of her husband,
Ninus.

52–54 she who died...
Sychaeus's (sī-kā'e-sīz) ashes:
Dido, the queen of Carthage who,
according to the *Aeneid*, vowed to
remain faithful to the memory of
her dead husband, Sychaeus, but
fell in love with Aeneas. When
Aeneas left for Italy, the aban-
doned Dido committed suicide.

55–56 Cleopatra... Helen... evil
years: Cleopatra was queen of
Egypt and a mistress to Julius
Caesar and Mark Antony. Helen,
according to Greek mythology, was
the most beautiful of women. She
left her husband, Menelaus
(mən'e-lā'es), to run off with Paris,
a prince of Troy. This action set off
the Trojan War.

57 Achilles: the hero of the Trojan
War who, according to one legend,
deserted the Greeks when he fell
in love with Polyxena (pə-īk'sē-
nə), daughter of King Priam of
Troy. On his way to meet her in a
temple, he was slain by Paris.

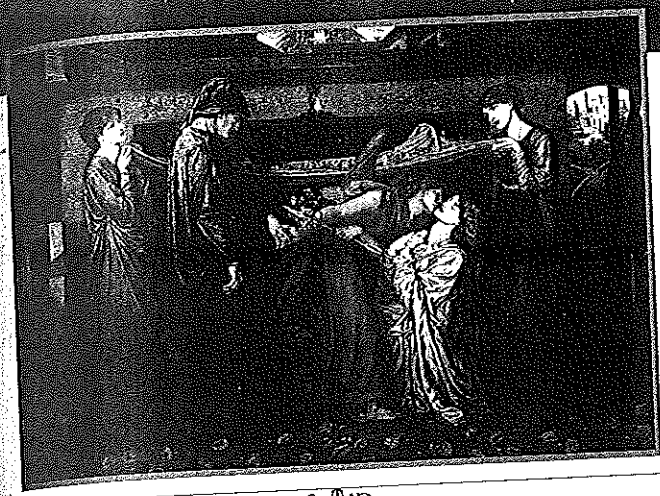
58 Paris and Tristan: Paris' love for
Helen caused the Trojan War.
Tristan, a hero from medieval
romances, had a love affair with
his uncle's bride.

71 Another: God.

WORDS TO KNOW

750

compulsion (kəm-pūl'shən) *n.* an ability to force action; irresistible impulse



Dante's Dream (1871), Dante Gabriel Rossetti.
Board of Trustees of the National Museums and
Galleries on Merseyside, Walker Art Gallery,
Liverpool, England.

80 "O living soul, who with courtesy and compassion
Voyage through black air visiting us who stained
The world with blood: if heaven's King bore affection

For such as we are, suffering in this wind,
Then we would pray to Him to grant you peace
For pitying us in this, our evil end.

85 Now we will speak and hear as you may please
To speak and hear, while the wind, for our discourse,
Is still. My birthplace is a city that lies

Where the Po finds peace with all its followers.
Love, which in gentle hearts is quickly born,
90 Seized him for my fair body—which, in a fierce

Manner that still torments my soul, was torn
Untimely away from me. Love, which absolves
None who are loved from loving, made my heart burn

95 With joy so strong that as you see it cleaves
Still to him, here. Love gave us both one death.
Caina awaits the one who took our lives."

These words were borne across from them to us.
When I had heard those afflicted souls, I lowered
My head, and held it so till I heard the voice

100 Of the poet ask, "What are you thinking?" I answered,
"Alas—that sweet conceptions and passion so deep
Should bring them here!" Then, looking up toward

87-88 My birthplace . . . all its fol-
lowers: The speaker is Francesca
Malatesta (frān-chās'kā mālā-
tēs'tā)—a real-life contemporary of
Dante's—who was born in
Ravenna, a city near the mouth of
the Po River. She was married to
Giovanni Malatesta in 1275 but fell
in love with his younger brother,
Paolo (pā'ō-lō). The affair continued
for several years until Giovanni
happened upon them and killed
them both.

94 cleaves: clings.

96 Caina . . . our lives: Caina, part
of the lowest circle of Hell, holds
the spirits of those who betrayed
their kin. Francesca expects that it
will be her husband's fate to go
there. When Dante wrote the
Inferno, Giovanni Malatesta was
still alive.

WORDS TO KNOW

discourse (dī's'kōrs') *n.* talk; conversation

The lovers: "Francesca, your suffering makes me weep
For sorrow and pity—but tell me, in the hours
105 Of sweetest sighing, how and in what shape

Or manner did Love first show you those desires
So hemmed by doubt?" And she to me: "No sadness
Is greater than in misery to rehearse

Memories of joy, as your teacher well can witness.
110 But if you have so great a craving to measure
Our love's first root, I'll tell it, with the fitness

Of one who weeps and tells. One day, for pleasure,
We read of Lancelot, by love constrained:
Alone, suspecting nothing, at our leisure.

115 Sometimes at what we read our glances joined,
Looking from the book each to the other's eyes,
And then the color in our faces drained.

But one particular moment alone it was
Defeated us: *the longed-for smile*, it said,
120 *Was kissed by that most noble lover*: at this,

This one, who now will never leave my side,
Kissed my mouth, trembling. A Galeotto, that book!
And so was he who wrote it; that day we read

No further." All the while the one shade spoke,
125 The other at her side was weeping; my pity
Overwhelmed me and I felt myself go slack:

Swooning as in death, I fell like a dying body.

113 Lancelot, by love constrained:
In the Arthurian legends, Lancelot
was King Arthur's noblest knight.
He could not resist falling in love
with the king's wife, Guinevere.

122 Galeotto (gă'lō-ō'tō): the go-
between who passed messages
from Lancelot to Guinevere.

126 go slack: lose muscle tension
or become unconscious.

Thinking Through the Literature

1. What was your reaction to Francesca and Paolo?
2. In his book *The Power of Myth*, the writer and scholar Joseph Campbell states that the lines describing how Francesca and Paolo fell in love are "the most famous lines in Dante." Why do you think these lines appeal to many readers?
3. All the lovers in this level of Hell are buffeted by strong, dark winds. What do you think the winds might represent?