



April 2017 Quarterly Discussion Questions
Concentration: Imaginative Literature

Reading: Dante's *Inferno*, Malebolge section
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1001/1001-h/1001-h.htm>

PART ONE: Leader - Alissa

- 1] Why does Dante go with Virgil and continue through the various levels of Hell?
- 2] Dante writes (in Canto XXVI), “And more my genius curb than I am wont,/That it may run not unless virtue guide it;/ So that if some good star, or better thing,/ Have given me good, I may myself not grudge it.” Is this experiential visit to Hell also descriptive of virtue in some way?
- 3] Is knowledge of sin an important requirement to gain access to paradise? Why does Dante write about purgatory on his way to paradise?
- 4] Does Dante's trip through Hell further punish the sinners in any way? Is there some effect or importance of witnessing their punishments?
- 5] Does Dante pity or identify with any of the sinners? Is the reader meant to pity or identify with them? Why? If we do or do not feel anything, are we in some way participating in sin? Is Dante participating in sin?

PART TWO: Leader – Peter Ponzio

- 6] Dante establishes ten bolgia (pockets) where he places sinners. These pockets are arranged in the following order: 1 pimps and seducers; 2 flatterers; 3 Simoniacs; 4 soothsayers; 5 corrupt officials (barraters); 6 hypocrites; 7 thieves; 8 intellectually dishonest; 9 rabble rousers; 10 counterfeiters and forgers (see the graph at the end of this question list). The sinners are arranged in order of the gravity of their sins. Why does Dante place the sinners in this order? Do you agree with Dante's ordering of these sinners? Why or why not?
- 7] In the Malebolge, Dante attempts to match the sin committed with the punishment meted out to each sinner. Why has Dante attempted to match the punishment with the sin committed? In each bolgia, the punishment is singular in nature, until pocket 10 is reached, and there the punishment can vary according to the crime committed. Which of the punishments in which bolgia appears most suited to the sin? Which punishment in which bolgia seems least suited to the sin? Do you agree with Dante's matching of sin committed and punishment? Why or why not?
- 8] In bolgia 8, Dante and Virgil meet with Ulysses and Diomedes who are in the bolgia reserved for those sinners who are intellectually dishonest. In the case of these two Greek warriors, they are assigned to this bolgia for the deception of the Trojan Horse. Dante did not have access to Homer's

Iliad or *Odyssey*, and relied on Virgil's *Aeneid* for details about the Trojan War. Virgil traced the foundation of Rome to an oracle predicting the Trojans would found a great city in Italy. Was Dante's understanding of Ulysses' and Diomedes' sins based upon Virgil's narration of the Trojan War? Do you think his opinion of the crimes of Ulysses and Diomedes would have been different if he had access to Homers' works?

9] Similarly, Sinon a Greek warrior who pretended to be abandoned by the Greek troops, and convinced the Trojans to accept the horse into the city, is found in bolgia 10 next to Master Adam (Canto XXIX, Canto XXX). Sinon is being consumed by an internal fever which makes him reek; he is in this bolgia because he made a counterfeit claim to the Trojans. Dante placed Sinon in this bolgia based on Virgil's account of the Trojan War. Do you think that Dante would have had a different opinion of Sinon had he read Homer? Was Sinon's act any better or worse than any of the other deeds committed during the Trojan War?

10] One of the themes of the *Inferno*, and of the Malebolge section, is the feud between the Guelphs and Ghibellines. Many of the people whom Dante interviews are involved in the warfare between the two factions that resulted in Dante being expelled from Florence. Although the references to these people are now somewhat obscure, what point is Dante trying to make regarding this internecine conflict? How does he feel about the Church's involvement in these struggles (he places a number of Popes in the Malebolge for their actions during the wars)? What does he think about the involvement of foreign powers (i.e. non-Italian powers) in fomenting the war?

11] Dante places Caiaphas and Annas in bolgia 6 (Canto XXIII), nailed to the ground outstretched as if on a cross. The sinners in this bolgia wear lead cloaks that are so heavy they impede their movements. The sinners are forced to walk over Caiaphas and Annas who are made to bear the weight of the sinners, just as Jesus was said to bear the weight of the sins of the world. Is the punishment of these two fitting, according to Dante?

12] In bolgia 9 (Canto XXVIII), Dante encounters Mohammed and places him in the sector reserved for rabble rousers. It has been suggested that Dante (and others during his time) believed that Mohammed was originally a Christian and then turned against his religion, essentially making him a schismatic. There is no evidence to suggest that Mohammed was formerly a Christian, although his efforts to found a new religion resulted in animosity between Christians and Muslims. Why does Dante place Mohammed in this bolgia? Why does he place him at a lower level in Hell than are Caiaphas and Annas?

13] In bolgia 7 (Canto XXV), Dante encounters Vanni Fucci, who gives the "figs" to God. What does Dante mean when he remarks: "Through all the sombre circles of this Hell, /Spirit I saw not against God so proud. . ." Why does Dante place Vanni Fucci in the 7th circle? Since pride is the ultimate sin of Satan, do you think Vanni Fucci should have been relegated to a lower level of Hell, perhaps nearer to Satan?

Listed below is a table which summarizes the levels of the Malebolge, the sin committed by the souls in that level, and the punishment meted out to each sinner.

Bolgia Number	Sin	Punishment
1	Pimps and seducers	Scourged by demons
2	Flatterers	Buried in pool of ordure
3	Simoniacs	Buried face-down in baptistry fonts
4	Soothsayers	People with their heads placed on backwards
5	Corrupt officials (barratry)	Placed in burning lake of pitch
6	Hypocrites	Made to wear cloak that appears shiny on the outside but is made of lead
7	Thieves	Sinners besieged by serpents who consume their form, just as thieves consumed property belonging to others
8	Intellectually dishonest	Sinners in this bolgia are engulfed in flame, presumably because their intellectual dishonesty engulfed them
9	Rabble rousers	These sinners were split in two parts in some way, just as they incited divisiveness among the populace
10	Counterfeiters and forgers	Different punishments involving scabrous itching; ravaging; extreme, unrelieved thirst; fever that produces stench. Their punishments are varied but are related to the number of people they duped by their crimes