



Summary of Canto: Inferno III

1-9	words inscribed above the gate of hell
10-12	having read them, Dante is afraid
13-21	Virgil admonishes, then encourages, Dante
22-30	tumultuous sound made by mouths and hands
31-33	Dante asks who these shades (in Circle 'zero') are
34-42	Virgil: the neutrals and the neutral angels
43-44	Dante wants to know the reason for their lamentation
45-51	Virgil: they would rather be anyone but themselves
52-57	Dante watches shades following a wavering banner
58-63	he knows some, and one who 'made the great refusal'
64-69	they are stung by insects that make their faces bleed
70-75	looking ahead, Dante sees a crowd at a river bank
76-78	Virgil says his questions will be answered later
79-81	Dante's shame at this implicit criticism
82-93	appearance of Charon; his refusal to ferry Dante
94-99	Virgil's rejoinder stills Charon
100-111	shades, cursing, enter his skiff; he strikes laggards
112-120	similes: leaves in fall, falcon returning to falconer
121-126	Virgil: the damned want the justice of their penalty
127-129	Virgil explains Charon's desire not to include Dante
130-136	the earthquake and Dante's fainting fit

1 THROUGH ME THE WAY TO THE CITY OF WOE,
 2 THROUGH ME THE WAY TO ETERNAL PAIN,
 3 THROUGH ME THE WAY AMONG THE LOST.
 4 JUSTICE MOVED MY MAKER ON HIGH.
 5 DIVINE POWER MADE ME,
 6 WISDOM SUPREME, AND PRIMAL LOVE.
 7 BEFORE ME NOTHING WAS BUT THINGS ETERNAL,
 8 AND I ENDURE ETERNALLY.
 9 ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE.
 10 These words, dark in hue, I saw inscribed
 11 over an archway. And then I said:
 12 'Master, for me their meaning is hard.'
 13 And he, as one who understood:
 14 'Here you must banish all distrust,
 15 here must all cowardice be slain.
 16 'We have come to where I said
 17 you would see the miserable sinners
 18 who have lost the good of the intellect.'
 19 And after he had put his hand on mine
 20 with a reassuring look that gave me comfort,
 21 he led me toward things unknown to man.
 22 Now sighs, loud wailing, lamentation
 23 resounded through the starless air,

What does the inscription on the gates of Hell imply about the divine perspective on the sinful and about the place of Hell in God's plan? Consider, for instance, the phrase "the primal love" -- in what sense does that kind of language on the gates of Hell seem strange to our modern ears?

How does the inscription indirectly explain why the damned are so eager to cross the Acheron and receive their punishment?

Who were the cowards in Canto III?

24 so that I too began to weep.
25 Unfamiliar tongues, horrendous accents,
26 words of suffering, cries of rage, voices
27 loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands --
28 all these made a tumult, always whirling
29 in that black and timeless air,
30 as sand is swirled in a whirlwind.
31 And I, my head encircled by error, said:
32 'Master, what is this I hear, and what people
33 are these so overcome by pain?'
34 And he to me: 'This miserable state is borne
35 by the wretched souls of those who lived
36 without disgrace yet without praise.
37 'They intermingle with that wicked band
38 of angels, not rebellious and not faithful
39 to God, who held themselves apart.
40 'Loath to impair its beauty, Heaven casts them out,
41 and depth of Hell does not receive them
42 lest on their account the evil angels gloat.'
43 And I: 'Master, what is so grievous to them,
44 that they lament so bitterly?'
45 He replied: 'I can tell you in few words.
46 'They have no hope of death,
47 and their blind life is so abject
48 that they are envious of every other lot.
49 'The world does not permit report of them.
50 Mercy and justice hold them in contempt.
51 Let us not speak of them -- look and pass by.'
52 And I, all eyes, saw a whirling banner
53 that ran so fast it seemed as though
54 it never could find rest.
55 Behind it came so long a file of people
56 that I could not believe
57 death had undone so many.
58 After I recognized a few of these,
59 I saw and knew the shade of him
60 who, through cowardice, made the great refusal.
61 At once with certainty I understood
62 this was that worthless crew
63 hateful alike to God and to His foes.
64 These wretches, who never were alive,
65 were naked and beset
66 by stinging flies and wasps
67 that made their faces stream with blood,
68 which, mingled with their tears,
69 was gathered at their feet by loathsome worms.
70 And then, fixing my gaze farther on,
71 I saw souls standing on the shore of a wide river,
72 and so I said: 'Master, permit me first

What was Dante's first reaction to the wailing?

What is Dante's initial reaction to the many souls he sees in the Vestibule of Hell?

To what does Dante compare the worry that the uncommitted might be missing something?

The uncommitted had saved their blood all their lives. What was the ultimate result of this act?

73 'to know who they are and then what inner law
74 makes them so eager for the crossing,
75 or so it seems in this dim light.'
76 And he to me: 'You shall know these things,
77 but not before we stay our steps
78 on the mournful shore of Acheron.'
79 Then, my eyes cast down with shame,
80 fearing my words displeased him,
81 I did not speak until we reached that stream.
82 And now, coming toward us in a boat,
83 an old man, his hair white with age, cried out:
84 'Woe unto you, you wicked souls,
85 'give up all hope of ever seeing heaven.
86 I come to take you to the other shore,
87 into eternal darkness, into heat and chill.
88 'And you there, you living soul,
89 move aside from these now dead.'
90 But when he saw I did not move,
91 he said: 'By another way, another port,
92 not here, you'll come to shore and cross.
93 A lighter ship must carry you.'
94 And my leader: 'Charon, do not torment yourself.
95 It is so willed where will and power are one,
96 and ask no more.'
97 That stilled the shaggy jowls
98 of the pilot of the livid marsh,
99 about whose eyes burned wheels of flame.
100 But those souls, naked and desolate,
101 lost their color. With chattering teeth
102 they heard his brutal words.
103 They blasphemed God, their parents,
104 the human race, the place, the time, the seed
105 of their begetting and their birth.
106 Then, weeping bitterly, they drew together
107 to the accursed shore that waits
108 for every man who fears not God.
109 Charon the demon, with eyes of glowing coals,
110 beckons to them, herds them all aboard,
111 striking anyone who slackens with his oar.
112 Just as in autumn the leaves fall away,
113 one, and then another, until the bough
114 sees all its spoil upon the ground,
115 so the wicked seed of Adam fling themselves
116 one by one from shore, at his signal,
117 as does a falcon at its summons.
118 Thus they depart over dark water,
119 and before they have landed on the other side
120 another crowd has gathered on this shore.
121 'My son,' said the courteous master,

*The river's name is translated as "joyous."
Why is this a good name for the river?*

*What is the name of the river which circles
the rim of Hell?*

What was the name of the ferryman?

122 'all those who die in the wrath of God
123 assemble here from every land.
124 'And they are eager to cross the river,
125 for the justice of God so spurs them on
126 their very fear is turned to longing.
127 'No good soul ever crosses at this place.
128 Thus, if Charon complains on your account,
129 now you can grasp the meaning of his words.'
130 When he had ended, the gloomy plain shook
131 with such force, the memory of my terror
132 makes me again break out in sweat.
133 From the weeping ground there sprang a wind,
134 flaming with vermilion light,
135 which overmastered all my senses,
136 and I dropped like a man pulled down by sleep.

What is Dante's reaction to the sights and sounds of Hell at the end of Canto III?