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English 201 A

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**Fact:**

An interesting fact from today's reading is Dante Alighieri's consistent use of the numeral 3. Dante wrote his entire poem in *terza rima*, a rhyme scheme Wilkie and Hurt define as being "written in tercets, three-line stanzas" with each "end-rhyme thus sounding three times" (1403). The editors also point out that the *Divine Comedy* is divided into 3 sections, and that each section contains 33 cantos (1403). Further yet, Dante visits three realms, Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and each realm consists of 9 (3 times 3) circles (1403). This use of 3s is interesting because it echoes the importance of the numeral 3 in scripture and in Christian theology. For example, Christ is tempted in the desert by Satan for 3 days, and he arises from the dead after 3 days in the tomb. Christ's relationship with God the Father is also described with a powerful 3: the Trinity that includes the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Since Dante's poem is spiritual in nature and attempts to teach us how he "abandoned the true way" (Alighieri I. 12), his use of 3 is a constant reminder of the God for whose Paradise Dante is striving. Ultimately, the entire poem can be said to pay mathematical homage to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.

**Interpretation:**

An interpretation that can be made of Canto I of *Inferno* is that Virgil represents the glories but also the limitations of human reason. As Dante becomes lost in "a dark forest" that is described as a "dense, wild, and tangled wood," he meets the ancient philosopher Virgil

(Alighieri I. 2, 5). Dante appears to rejoice when he sees Virgil, for he declares that Virgil is “my master and my author” (I. 85). Obviously, Dante admires and respects this ancient poet, for he believes that, because Virgil is the “honor and light of other poets” (I. 82), he can lead Dante out of the dark wood. Dante celebrates Virgil as the Roman poet who inspired him to study philosophy and who challenged Dante to “long study . . . / your volume” of writing (I. 83-4). Quite obviously, Virgil represents all that the human mind is capable of doing. Humans are able to write brilliant works, to pose philosophical theories, and to help others learn great truths.

Virgil, however, is called not only Dante’s guide through *Inferno* or hell. He is also a resident of hell’s first circle where the “virtuous pagans” live (Wilkie and Hurt 1407). Why is this great Roman poet doomed to be eternally separated from God? Virgil is doomed to hell because he never knew the true God. Though he studied theology and truth and though he accomplished virtuous deeds, he never worshipped what Dante believed to be the one, true God. Therefore, though his punishment is not as severe as others in hell, Virgil is condemned to be separated from God eternally. He is punished for relying on human reason, not godly truth. Apparently, Dante must learn to put his trust not in human knowledge but in godly knowledge.

**Tie-In:**

A tie-in to my knowledge appears in Canto 5 of *Inferno* in the description of Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo. The description can be said to have influenced the sculpture of Auguste Rodin entitled “The Kiss.” Dante meets the two in Canto 2 where those guilty of lust are punished and describes their punishment as follows:

And, as starlings are borne by their wings  
in the cold season, in a broad and dense flock,  
so the blast carries evil spirits.

Here, there, up, and down, it blows them;  
no hope ever comforts them  
of rest or even of less pain. (Alighieri V. 40-5)

In other words, the lovers are joined together forever and are buffeted by the winds of lust as if they exist in an eternal tornado! In Rodin's statue, two lovers are displayed in a similar and permanent embrace. While on the one hand beautiful and erotic, the sculpture also suggests that such permanency can be deadly, for the lovers are carved out of unfinished, rough, never-changing stone. Perhaps, Rodin like Dante wanted his audience to consider the imprisoning effect of love based on pure lust.