

**Prof. Joseph Luzzi**  
**Reading *The Divine Comedy: The Inferno***  
**Study Guide for NYC Book Club**

*Please note: the below are only intended to help you “get inside” Dante’s extremely complex, intricate work— please do not feel compelled to answer them in full, unless you wish to, and if there are questions or elements that you don’t understand, no worries, we will explain all when we meet for our seminar!*

1. What aspects of Dante’s biography help us understand the themes of his work? Why do you think he wrote *Inferno*, and what does this first canticle reveal about Dante’s education, intellectual background, and cultural context?
2. Do you consider *Inferno* a “medieval” work, or more of a “proto-Renaissance” one? Why are those two historical terms potentially important for helping us understand *The Divine Comedy*?
3. Why do you think that Dante chose to write his poem in Tuscan? What is the relation of that dialect to “Italian” in Dante’s epoch? What other linguistic option(s) did he have for his potential use, and what would each have represented?
4. The opening lines of *Inferno* are famous:

*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita  
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura*  
In the middle of our life’s journey  
I found myself in a dark wood

What do these two lines reveal about the larger issues and concerns of the poem?

5. What do you believe to be a keyword in your reading, and why? Are there any words that Dante repeats or seems to invest with particular weight or meaning?
6. Why Virgil as guide? What makes sense about this choice...what does not?
7. How would you describe the infamous rhetoric on the Gates of Hell in *Inferno* 3? What does it say about Hell as a larger construct of Dante’s imagination?
8. How would you describe the poetic imagery of *Inferno* 5? What is the relation between the sin of those in *Inferno* 5 and their punishment? What does that suggest about Dante’s understanding of Christian justice?
9. We can think of *Inferno* 10, the canto in which the Epicureans are punished for heresy, as a bittersweet “homecoming” for Dante the pilgrim, for it involves a series of encounters with the Florentine patriarchs Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti. What does the canto reveal about the issue of *exile*, and more broadly, Dante’s complex relation to the city that banned him for life in 1302? And what is about this “exilic perspective” that is so crucial to Dante’s literary vision?
10. What are the distinguishing qualities of the character of Ulysses in *Inferno* 26? What does the canto teach us about the power of rhetoric? And why do you think this *canto di Ulisse*, canticle of Ulysses, would go on to have such acclaim over the centuries?
11. The meeting between Dante and Ugolino in canto 33 is one of the most famous in all of Dante. What is the nature of the “counter-penalty” (*contrapasso*) in this canto, and what does it suggest about the particular nature of Ugolino’s sin? What is significant about the fact that he appears alongside his mortal

enemy, the Archbishop Ruggieri?

12. Why do you think that Dante chose those three particular sinners—Brutus, Cassius, and Judas—to represent the highest form of treachery and the lowest state of hell's punishment? What does this choice reveal about Dante's understanding of related issues like politics?
13. What is significant about the particular nature and traits of Dante's Satan? How do they suggest Dante's broader understanding of evil and loss of faith?
14. Why does the canticle of *Inferno* end with the word stelle, stars?
15. What is the single most important element of the *Inferno* as it relates to our lives today, in your view?