

The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri

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Inferno: Canton V (Excerpt)

I came into a place mute of all light,
Which bellows as the sea does in a tempest,
If by opposing winds 't is combated.

The infernal hurricane that never rests
Hurtles the spirits onward in its rapine;
Whirling them round, and smiting, it molests
them.

When they arrive before the precipice,
There are the shrieks, the plaints, and the
laments,
There they blaspheme the puissance divine.

I understood that unto such a torment
The carnal malefactors were condemned,
Who reason subjugate to appetite.

And as the wings of starlings bear them on
In the cold season in large band and full,
So doth that blast the spirits maledict;

It hither, thither, downward, upward, drives
them;
No hope doth comfort them for evermore,
Not of repose, but even of lesser pain.

And as the cranes go chanting forth their lays,
Making in air a long line of themselves,
So saw I coming, uttering lamentations,

Shadows borne onward by the aforesaid stress.
Whereupon said I: "Master, who are those
People, whom the black air so castigates?"

"The first of those, of whom intelligence
Thou fain wouldst have," then said he unto me,
"The empress was of many languages.

To sensual vices she was so abandoned,
That lustful she made licit in her law,
To remove the blame to which she had been
led.

She is Semiramis, of whom we read
That she succeeded Ninus, and was his spouse;
She held the land which now the Sultan rules

The next is she who killed herself for love,
And broke faith with the ashes of Sichaeus;
Then Cleopatra the voluptuous."

Helen I saw, for whom so many ruthless
Seasons revolved; and saw the great Achilles,
Who at the last hour combated with Love.

Paris I saw, Tristan; and more than a thousand
Shades did he name and point out with his
finger,
Whom Love had separated from our life.

After that I had listened to my Teacher,
Naming the dames of eld and cavaliers,
Pity prevailed, and I was nigh bewildered.

Questions:

(Answer on back)

1. What group of sinners is this level of hell reserved for?
2. What is their eternal punishment?
3. Who are three of the people pointed out as residents of this level of hell that you are familiar with?
4. Critical Thinking: What do you think is Dante's motivation for writing this piece?
5. Critical Thinking: How would the material from this poem benefit the church?