

English 10
Purgatorio 18-33
Plot review

In the moonlight the poets see a group of spirits running toward them. The leaders shout reminders of persons who exhibited great zeal. These are goads for the slothful. As the spirits rush past, Dante engages in a brief conversation with an abbot from Verona, who attained his post through nepotism. A spirit bringing up the rear of the group calls out sentences recalling tragic instances of sloth.

After that brief encounter Dante falls asleep and dreams that he is visited by a Siren who tries her charms on him until she is exposed by Virgil. When he wakes, an angel appears to remove another P from his brow and direct the pilgrims to the path leading up. Virgil explains that the Siren is symbolic of the love of unworthy objects which are atoned for on the next three terraces.

The spirits on the fifth terrace were guilty of either avarice or prodigality. As in *Inferno*, these two types of sin are treated together because they display opposite extremes. The penitents are lying face down in the dust, weeping, and reciting psalms or prayers. The pilgrims are addressed by a spirit who tells them that he was avaricious all his life until he attained the high throne of the church. He is Pope Adrian V. A voice of one of the penitents announces notable examples of dignified poverty and of generosity.

Hugh Capet, founder of the dynasty that had ruled France for more than two centuries pronounces scathing censure of the conduct his descendants, their treachery, and especially their spirit of acquisitiveness. He specifically denounces three Charleses and two Philips of Dante's time.

As the poets make their way beside the crowd of prostrate figures, they feel a violent quaking of the mountain, at which the spirits all proclaim *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. While Dante is puzzling over that phenomenon, a spirit comes up behind them; from him they learn that the quaking signals the completion of one soul's penance, for which all souls give thanks. It was for the speaker himself that the recent quake occurred. He tells them that he is Statius, a Roman poet, author of the epics *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*. When he learns Virgil's identity, his greeting to his avowed master displays intense gratitude and affection. From Statius the poets learn that the duration of a soul's penance is determined by that soul.

Statius joins the other two poets for the remainder of the journey in Purgatory. While they are climbing to the next terrace, Statius tells how he was first attracted to Christianity through the influence of a passage in Virgil's *Eclogues*.

On the sixth terrace, the first sight is a tree with luscious fruit and a fountain gushing from the mountainside watering it. From the tree issues a voice forbidding the tasting of the fruit and then announcing examples of temperance—the goads of gluttony. As the penitents hurry past, Dante

sees that they are pale, hollow-eyed, and emaciated beyond recognition. The first spirit to speak to Dante is Forese Donati, a relative of Dante's by marriage and a poet who had exchanged humorously insulting sonnets with Dante. After some discussion of the wasted bodies of the penitents, he reports how his passage through Ante-Purgatory was hastened by his wife's prayers. Other gluttons who are identified for Dante include a pope (Martin IV), an archbishop, and another poet.

Farther along the terrace is another tree, another offshoot from the tree of forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. From it comes a voice declaiming examples of the damaging effects of gluttony.

The seventh terrace, where lust is penalized, is occupied with a river of flames. Examples of chastity are recited by voices in the midst of the flames. Two groups of spirits pass one another going in opposite directions, one group guilty of natural lust, the other of perverted forms of lust. When Dante is addressed by Guido Guinizelli, he expresses his admiration for and indebtedness to Guido, on whose works he patterned his early lyrics. Guido points out another poem as famous as one of the Provençal troubadours, Arnaut Daniel. Both Guido and Arnaut were chiefly known for their love poems.

When Dante is told he must walk through the fire, he shrinks back in terror; but at Virgil's reminder that Beatrice waits beyond the fire, Dante advances eagerly. Though he is not scorched by flames, he suffers intense pain. At last the poets come out of the fire on the mountainside at the point where the path leads up to the summit.

Night overtakes the pilgrims and they rest on the stair mounting to the Earthly Paradise. In a dream Dante sees Leah in a flowery field. She tells him that her joy is to walk in the fields, gathering flowers and weaving them into garlands. Her sister Rachel is happy sitting before her mirror all day, contemplating her lovely eyes. The two ladies are allegorical figures for the active and contemplative life, respectively.

At the summit of the mountain Virgil tells Dante that he has completed his mission as Dante's guide. Dante is now his own master.

The Earthly Paradise contains all things beautiful in nature. As Dante explores the garden, he comes to a clear stream across which he sees a beautiful young damsel picking flowers and singing an enchanting song. This is Matilda, who, like Leah, in his dream, represents the active life. She tells Dante that this is the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve dwelt in their original state of innocence.

The stream that separates Dante and Matilda is Lethe. She leads him along the bank until they meet a marvelous procession symbolizing the Church Militant in its pristine state. At the head of the march are seven lighted candles that leave streamers of rainbow-colored lights. Next come a group of elders representing the books of the Old Testament. After these appear four creatures

with wings covered with eyes, representing the four Evangelists. They are placed at the four corners of a magnificent chariot drawn by a Griffin, half eagle and half lion. The chariot represents the Church; the Griffin, Christ. Beside the right wheel of the chariot are three dancing maidens in white, green, and red—the theological virtues. By the left wheel walk four maidens all in purple, the cardinal virtues. Finally come seven more elders representing the remaining books of the New Testament.

The chariot halts opposite Dante but across a river. Through a shower of roses a lady appears who, though she wears a veil, Dante knows is Beatrice. Her first greeting is a stern reprimand for his wayward life after her death.

It is necessary, she says, that he pay the penalty of tears for his errant ways. At the recollection of his sins, Dante weeps bitterly. When Beatrice demands that he confess his guilt, he complies, but in a frightened voice that is scarcely audible. He is so overcome with remorse that he faints. When he revives, Matilda is leading him across Lethe, the river that allows one to forget past sins, and bathes him. Once across, he is conducted to Beatrice and, to Dante's intense joy, she lifts her veil.

The procession, wheeling around, comes to form a circle around a bare tree. When the Griffin binds the shaft of the chariot to its trunk, leaves and blossoms burst forth on the tree. The procession then departs, but Beatrice, Matilda, Dante, and Statius remain and witness a series of attacks on the tree and the chariot by an eagle, a fox, a dragon, a harlot, and a giant.

The giant carries off the broken remains of the once beautiful chariot. This drama presents an allegory of the history of the church with its enemies from within and without causing its dissensions and corruption.

The foregoing pageant implies the triumph of evil in the modern world, but Beatrice will appear to restore the rightful authority of both church and state.

Beatrice, Dante, and their companions approach a fountain that feeds the two rivers, Lethe and Eunoë. Matilda conducts Dante and Statius to Eunoë, which restores the memory of good deeds. The soul must drink of both rivers before rising to Paradise. After drinking from Eunoë, Dante feels an exaltation from his completed purification.