

6-2016

# Dante's Inferno: Allegory, Hero's Journey, or Epic Poem? Yes! (12th grade)

Sherry Brown

Trinity University, [awittyfool@gmail.com](mailto:awittyfool@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ\\_understandings](http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ_understandings)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Brown, Sherry, "Dante's Inferno: Allegory, Hero's Journey, or Epic Poem? Yes! (12th grade)" (2016). *Understanding by Design: Complete Collection*. 345.

[http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ\\_understandings/345](http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ_understandings/345)

This Instructional Material is brought to you for free and open access by the Understanding by Design at Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information about this unie, please contact the author(s): [awittyfool@gmail.com](mailto:awittyfool@gmail.com). For information about the series, including permissions, please contact the administrator: [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

6-2016

# Dante's Inferno: Allegory, Hero's Journey, or Epic Poem? Yes! (12th grade)

Sherry Brown

Trinity University, [awittyfool@gmail.com](mailto:awittyfool@gmail.com)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ\\_understandings](http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ_understandings)



Part of the [Education Commons](#)

---

## Repository Citation

Brown, Sherry, "Dante's Inferno: Allegory, Hero's Journey, or Epic Poem? Yes! (12th grade)" (2016). *Understanding by Design: Complete Collection*. Paper 345.

[http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ\\_understandings/345](http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/educ_understandings/345)

This Instructional Material is brought to you for free and open access by the Understanding by Design at Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Understanding by Design: Complete Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact [jcostanz@trinity.edu](mailto:jcostanz@trinity.edu).

## UbD Dante's *The Inferno*

<b>Stage 1 – Desired Results</b>	
<b>Meaning</b>	
<p><b>Understandings</b> <i>Students will understand that...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>... engagement with literature is dialogic in nature.</li> <li>... literature forms and is formed by national identity.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Essential Questions</b></p> <p>In what ways can fiction reveal Truth? Is there such a thing as Universal Truth?</p> <p>Is punishment necessary for justice to be achieved?</p> <p>What is justice?</p> <p>Are some sins worse than others?</p> <p>How does religious belief/nonbelief influence our actions?</p> <p>Is <i>The Inferno</i> relevant to non-Christian readers?</p>
<b>Acquisition</b>	
<p><b>Knowledge</b> <i>Students will know...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>... the difference between allegory and symbolism.</li> <li>... who Dante Alighieri is and the political world in which he lived.</li> <li>... about Dante's literary influences.</li> <li>... what is unique about Dante's poetic style.</li> <li>... what <i>contrapasso</i> is.</li> <li>... the characteristics and purposes of epic poetry.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Skills</b> <i>Students will be able to...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>... recognize and "decode" allegory.</li> <li>... apply the Hero Journey Cycle to literature and film.</li> <li>... give specific, constructive feedback to one another.</li> <li>... successfully take notes on student presentations and then use those notes on quizzes.</li> </ul>
<b>Stage 2 – Evidence</b>	
<p><b>Performance Task(s)</b> <i>Students will demonstrate meaning-making and transfer by...</i></p> <p>Collaborative Presentation Individual Essay Visual Representation</p> <hr style="border-top: 1px dashed black;"/> <p>Other Evidence (e.g., formative)</p> <p>Presentation feedback Reading reflections/in-class quick writes Open-note quizzes</p>	

### Stage 3 – Learning Plan

#### Pre-Assessment

*How will you check students' prior knowledge, skill levels, and potential misconceptions?*

KWL of Christian/Dante Hell  
Review of epic poetry conventions  
List and analysis of known allegories  
Chart of hero's journey

#### Learning Activities

**Exploration of *The Inferno's* first sentence**  
**Analysis of Tolkien's "Leaf by Niggle"**  
**Affinity mapping protocol**  
**Creation of visual representations of Dante's Inferno**  
**Placing literary characters into the levels of Hell**

Daily lessons:

1. Distribute copies of the first sentence from *The Inferno* along with the associated focus. Print each focus on a different color. In other words, print copies of the paper about in medias res on blue, and copies of the paper about the word lost in green, etc. As the students come in at the beginning of class, give each of them a paper and have them jot down their responses silently on the paper. Give them about 5 minutes or so. Then have them find someone with the same color and exchange papers. Have them read one another's responses and then discuss for a couple of minutes. Then have each pair get with a pair of students with a different color paper to read and discuss. Then have a whole class discussion.

Once the discussion has concluded, explain that we will focus on three aspects of Dante's work: its identity as an allegory, its identity as an epic poem, and its identity as a hero journey. There is a great deal of overlap in these three ways of looking at the work, but the focus is a bit different. A study of allegory looks at the didactic and cautionary aspects of the work. A study of epic poetry elucidates the poet's idea of national identity and nostalgia for a Golden Age (or in Christian terms, the time before The Fall.) A study of hero journey is interested in the universality of the work as it relates to human nature in general.

First we will begin with a study of allegory, so we will move away from Dante for a day or so and look at a short allegory by J.R.R. Tolkien. Distribute copies of "Leaf by Niggle" or send the students this link: <https://heroicjourneys.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/niggle.pdf>. Students should read it by the next class period.

2. "Leaf by Niggle" Day 1

Divide the class into groups. One group will simply list the steps in the plot of the story. The other groups will be given specific aspects of the story to focus on (the characters, the objects, the places.) Then each group will present to the class. [See "Leaf by Niggle" charts.]

3. "Leaf by Niggle" Day 2

Divide the class into groups (different groups than the previous day). Each group will have to write a 2 sentence thesis about "Leaf by Niggle." The first sentence will be:

*In "Leaf by Niggle," the author J.R.R. Tolkien is addressing the concept of \_\_\_\_\_.*

The second sentence will be:

*This story illustrates that \_\_\_\_\_.*

or

*Niggle's experience demonstrates that \_\_\_\_\_.*

Once each group has written their theses, they will post them around the room for a whole class discussion.

4. What do you know about the Christian Hell? How much of that is attributable to Dante? [Do modified KWL chart.] The L column will be left blank until the end of this unit when we will revisit it.

Use a modified Affinity Mapping Protocol to have the students list types of sins, group them, label them, and rank them. We will keep this displayed in the classroom and refer back to it as we move through Dante's levels of Hell.

5. Background lecture about Dante, his influences, the political situation in Florence, the organization of *The Inferno*. Assign circles for presentations.
6. Refresh the students' knowledge of the Hero's Journey. Distribute a blank schematic and have them try to complete it from memory with a partner.
7. Review the elements of epic poetry and discuss how we see those elements in Dante's *The Inferno*.
8. When a student presents, the other students use the note-taking form for taking notes. The presenter tells the class which canto (s)he is presenting and which circle of Hell and subcircle (for example, which pouch for circle 8). The student does not tell the class anything else at first, such as what sin is being addressed.

The presenter displays the initial image or quote, or plays the initial audio or video clip. Then the class is given a few minutes to write reactions to the initial item. After 3-4 minutes of writing, the presenter allows the class a few minutes to discuss their reactions. Then (s)he introduces the sin being addressed and presents the rest of his/her presentation.

Students take notes and then turn in their note-taking sheets to the teacher. When the teacher provides a grade to the presenter, (s)he includes a summary of the feedback that the students provided.

Then next day, students are given back their note-taking sheets and use them for the quiz over the previous day's material.

9. Visual representation of Dante's Hell. Gallery walk and celebration(!): Students will create their own visual representation of Dante's Hell. This can be a physical model or diorama, chart or artistic image, or computer-generated model. We will set up these representations and have a gallery walk with opportunities for students and teachers to vote for their favorite (come up with categories.) The next day we will unveil the winners and have a celebration during lunch.
10. Provide examples of contemporary quotes/misquotes of Dante. Ask students to come up with their own humorous quotes.
11. As a review at the end of the semester, students will place literary characters into levels of Dante's Hell.

This is the first sentence of Dante's *The Inferno*:

"Midway in the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood,

For the straight way was lost."

Often epic poetry begins *in medias res*, which means that it begins in the middle of the story, not at the beginning. Reflect on why a poet would begin a story in this way. What seems significant about this particular quote?

---

This is the first sentence of Dante's *The Inferno*:

"Midway in the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood,

For the straight way was lost."

In this quote, there is a shift from 1<sup>st</sup> person plural (our) to 1<sup>st</sup> person singular (I/myself). Why? What do you think is the purpose of this shift? What effect does it have on the reader?

---

This is the first sentence of Dante's *The Inferno*:

"Midway in the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood,

For the straight way was lost."

What is meant by "I came to myself"? Why does Dante use this phrase?

---

This is the first sentence of Dante's *The Inferno*:

"Midway in the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood,

For the straight way was lost."

What could the "dark wood" represent?

---

This is the first sentence of Dante's *The Inferno*:

"Midway in the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood,

For the straight way was lost."

What is the connotation of the phrase "straight way"?

---

This is the first sentence of Dante's *The Inferno*:

"Midway in the journey of our life

I came to myself in a dark wood,

For the straight way was lost."

Why do you think Dante ends this sentence with the word "lost"? What are the connotations of the word *lost*? What might this mean for the rest of the work?

---

## "Leaf by Niggle" Character Study

What do we know about these characters by (a) their names, (b) how the narrator describes them, (c) what they think, (d) what they do, (e) what they say, (f) what other people say or think about them, and (g) how they change? Not all of these factors will apply to each character.

Niggle:

Parish:

the Inspector of Houses:

a Voice:

a Second Voice:

the shepherd:

councilor Tompkins:

Atkins:

"Leaf by Niggle" Object Study

What possible figurative meaning is imbedded in the following items? What could they represent besides their physical reality?

the painting:

the leaf:

the Tree:

the birds:

the tonics:

## "Leaf by Niggle" Place Study

What possible figurative meaning is imbedded in the following places? What could they represent besides their physical reality?

the Tree:

the Workhouse:

the Forest:

the Mountains:

call to adventure  
(resistance/preparation)

return  
(with elixir/boon/ talisman/  
gift of the goddess/knowledge)

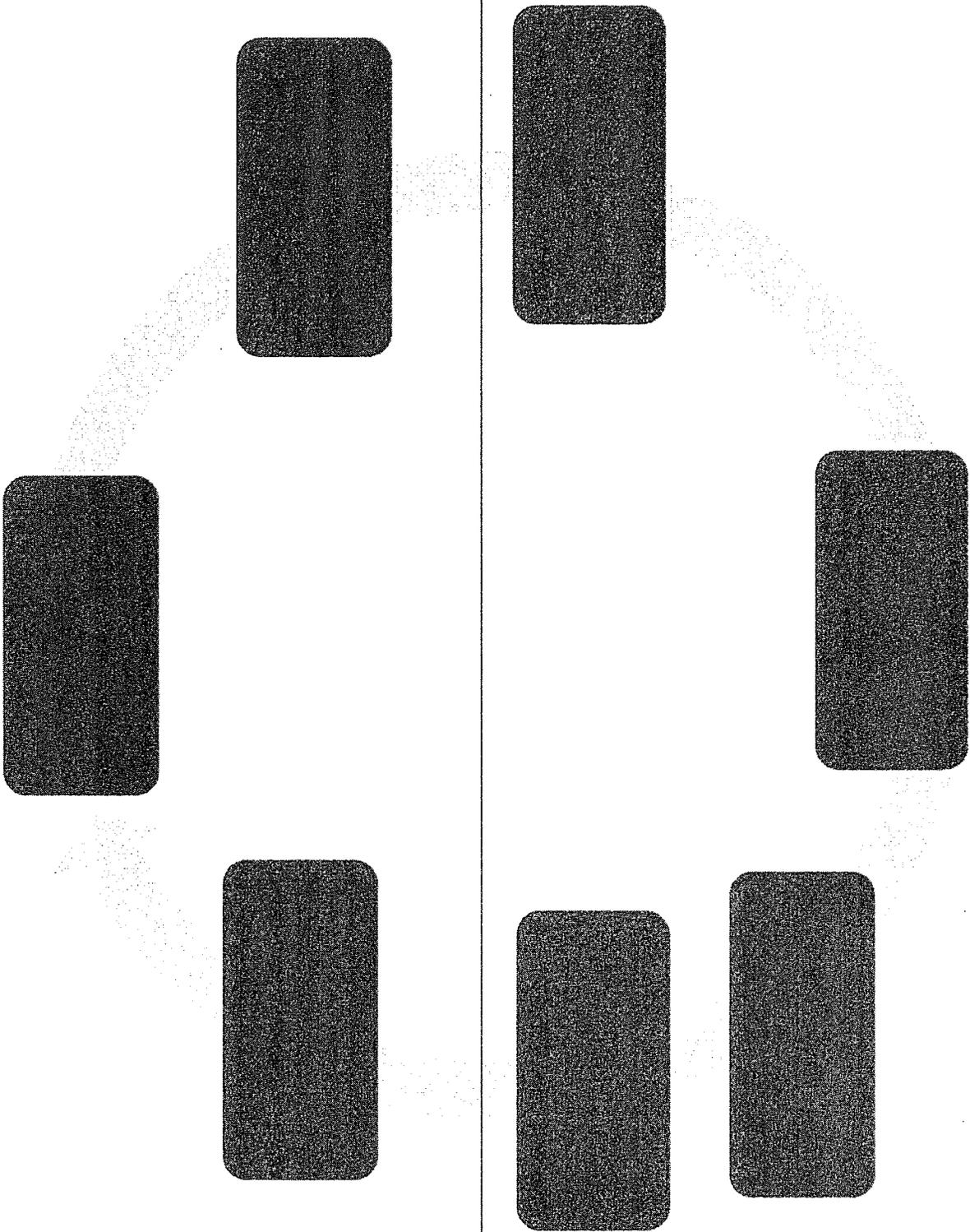
crossing the threshold  
• (guardian)

atonement/transformation  
(master of 2 worlds)

initiation/challenges/temptations  
• (helpers/tempters)

revelation

the abyss/belly of the whale  
• (mentor)



## Modified Affinity Mapping Protocol

### **Preparation:**

Hang a sheet of paper across one wall of the classroom. Provide the students with sticky notes.

### **Process:**

This entire process happens silently.

Ask students to write a type of sin (it can be general like “lying” or specific like “taking a book out of someone’s locker”) on a sticky note and post it anywhere on the paper wall. Once they have completed this step, instruct them to silently move notes around to group them into categories. Tell students they can move their own sticky notes and others’ notes. It is possible that a note is moved a number of times around the paper wall until it finds a location that seems to satisfy everyone.

Once notes are moved into groups, the students talk amongst themselves and label the categories. They should write the categories paper wall and line the appropriate sticky notes up under the category titles.

*(This protocol is adapted from School Reform Initiative’s Affinity Mapping, developed by educators in the field and adapted by Ross Peterson-Veatch, 2006.)*

What do you know about Christian Hell?

KNOW	WANT TO LEARN	LEARNED



In this column, write B if you think this detail about Hell is from the Bible, or write D if you think this detail was invented by Dante.

## Dante Presentation & Essay

### **Part 1: Collaborative Presentation**

You and your partner will provide a 10 minute presentation to the class about your chosen canto/circle of Hell.

You will begin your presentation with a hook - an image, quote, video clip, or audio clip that captures your audience's attention. If you choose an audio or video clip, it should be no more than 2 minutes. This should give a glimpse into the themes/content of your canto/circle.

After you provide this introductory piece. You'll give the class a few minutes to write their responses to it and then to discuss it. You are not a part of this initial discussion.

Then you will tell the class about the sin which is being addressed in your portion of Inferno and proceed with your presentation. Your presentation should be mostly visual in the form of PowerPoint slides, Prezi, or other multimedia format. There should be very little text on these slides!

The following must be addressed in your presentation:

- What are the physical features of this part of the Inferno?
- What is the punishment for this sin?
- Are there any demons or beasts in this circle? Who/what are they?
- Are there any people that Dante the traveler recognizes or addresses? Who are they?
- How does Dante (and/or Virgil) react to what he sees and whom he meets here?
- What do you think that Dante the poet is saying about this sin, these people, or humankind in general?
- Is there anything else of interest that would add to your presentation?

The presentation should take 10 minutes (not including the time for the class to respond to and discuss the initial image or clip.)

You must cite any images, quotes, or clips that you use. This MLA works cited should be at the end of your presentation.

Some interesting websites to consult which might be helpful to you are:

<http://www.worldofdante.org/>

Your presentation will be uploaded to Google Drive by the due date, regardless of your presentation date.

Rubric:

- |        |   |
|--------|---|
| 10 pts | Your hook is relevant and interesting.  |
| 10 pts | You and your partner work well together in presenting the material.                     |
| 10 pts | Your presentation is well-organized and flows from one point of information to another. |
| 10 pts | There is evidence of creativity in the choice of visual and auditory elements.          |
| 10 pts | You have covered all of the relevant elements of your canto/circle.                     |
| 10 pts | Your MLA works cited page/slide is correctly formatted and complete.                    |

## **Part 2: Independent Essay**

The second part of this assignment is a short essay. There is no length requirement, but I suggest a length of around 500 words. You and your partner will each choose a different essay topic. You will work independently on this essay. The content of this essay is based upon your own interpretive skills, although certainly the knowledge that you gleaned from your preparation for the presentation will be considered as you write this. Any information that you used from outside sources should be cited in this essay, but I want this primarily to be your own work. The two possible topics of this essay are below. If you want to choose a different topic, please have it approved by me.

Option A:

How does Dante the traveler react to what and whom he sees in your canto/circle? Is there anything important about the way Dante the traveler and Virgil interact with one another? What do these things tell us about Dante the Traveler – his beliefs or his growth along this journey through Hell?

Option B:

How does Dante the poet describe the sin addressed in your canto/circle? What does that tell us about what the poet wants the reader to know or learn?

This essay is graded using the standard TMI writing rubric. It is worth 40 points. It should be emailed to me and submitted to turnitin by 7:00 am on \_\_\_\_\_.

your name: \_\_\_\_\_

**Dante's *Inferno* Note-taking**

Canto \_\_\_\_\_

Circle of Hell \_\_\_\_\_

Response to opening image/quote/video/audio: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

Physical description of place \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

Presenter's name \_\_\_\_\_

Sin: \_\_\_\_\_

Punishments: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

Demons/Creatures: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

People (include names, whether historical/mythological/literary figures, summary of identity): \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

---

Other interesting information (such as Dante's or Virgil's reactions to what they see): \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

What is Dante the poet saying about this particular sin? \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

Feedback for presenter: \_\_\_\_\_

---

---

---

---

*You will receive a daily grade on the feedback that you provide for the presenter.  
Your grade for these notes will be based upon your performance on open-note quizzes.*

## Model of Dante's Hell

You will create a representation of Dante's Hell with as much detail as possible about the physical characteristics that he describes in *The Inferno*. You may create a diorama or other three-dimensional model, you may create a piece of original art or a chart, or, you may create a computer-generated graphic or interactive program.

Your representation will be graded on the following attributes:

creativity - Your project shows an original approach to representing Dante's creation.

difficulty - Your project provides evidence of time, effort, and thought.

authenticity - Your project is true to Dante's text.

Teachers and English IV students will have an opportunity to vote for their favorite project in several categories. The winners will receive extra credit.

Quotes (and misquotes) from Dante's *The Inferno*

There is a special place in hell for women who don't help each other!" - Madeleine Albright

"If you take sexual advantage of her, you're going to burn in a very special level of hell. A level they reserve for child molesters and people who talk at the theatre."" - Book (Firefly)

"Dante once said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality." - John F. Kennedy, Jr.

"There's a special rung in hell reserved for people who waste good scotch." -Lt. Archie Hicox (Inglourious Basterds)

**Come up with your own humorous circle of Hell and place it somewhere amongst Dante's nine circles.**