

# Inferno Canto 5

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## Canto V

### Argument

Coming into the second circle of Hell, Dante at the entrance beholds Minos the Infernal Judge, by whom he is admonished to beware how he enters those regions. Here he witnesses the punishment of carnal sinners, who are tossed about ceaselessly in the dark air by the most furious winds. Among these, he meets with Francesca of Rimini, through pity at whose sad tale he falls fainting to the ground.

From the first circle I descended thus  
Down to the second, which, a lesser space  
Embracing, so much more of grief contains,  
Provoking bitter moans. There Minos stands,  
Grinning with ghastly feature: he, of all  
Who enter, strict examining the crimes,  
Gives sentence, and dismisses them beneath,  
According as he foldeth him around:  
For when before him comes the ill - fated soul,  
It all confesses; and that judge severe  
Of sins, considering what place in Hell  
Suits the transgression, with his tail so oft  
Himself encircles, as degrees beneath  
He dooms it to descend. Before him stand  
Always a numerous throng; and in his turn  
Each one to judgment passing, speaks, and hears  
His fate, thence downward to his dwelling hurl'd.  
"O thou! who to this residence of woe  
Approachest!" when he saw me coming, cried  
Minos, relinquishing his dread employ,  
"Look how thou enter here; beware in whom  
Thou place thy trust; let not the entrance broad  
Deceive thee to thy harm." To him my guide:  
"Wherefore exclaimest? Hinder not his way  
By destiny appointed; so 'tis will'd,  
Where will and power are one. Ask thou no more."

Now 'gin the rueful wailings to be heard.  
Now am I come where many a plaining voice  
Smites on mine ear. Into a place I came  
Where light was silent all. Bellowing there groan'd

A noise, as of a sea in tempest torn  
By warring winds. The stormy blast of Hell  
With restless fury drives the spirits on,  
Whirl'd round and dash'd amain with sore annoy.  
When they arrive before the ruinous sweep,  
There shrieks are heard, there lamentations, moans,  
And blasphemies 'gainst the good Power in Heaven.  
I understood, that to this torment sad  
The carnal sinners are condemn'd, in whom  
Reason by lust is sway'd. As, in large troops  
And multitudinous, when winter reigns,  
The starlings on their wings are borne abroad;  
So bears the tyrannous gust those evil souls.  
On this side and on that, above, below,  
It drives them: hope of rest to solace them  
Is none, nor e'en of milder pang. As cranes,  
Chanting their dolorous notes, traverse the sky,  
Stretch'd out in long array; so I beheld  
Spirits, who came loud wailing, hurried on  
By their dire doom. Then I: "Instructor! who  
Are these, by the black air so scourged?" "The first  
'Mong those, of whom thou question'st," he replied,  
"O'er many tongues was empress. She in vice  
Of luxury was so shameless, that she made  
Liking be lawful by promulged decree,  
To clear the blame she had herself incurr'd.  
This is Semiramis, of whom 'tis writ,  
That she succeeded Ninus her espoused;  
And held the land, which now the Soldan rules.  
The next in amorous fury slew herself,  
And to Sichaeus' ashes broke her faith:  
Then follows Cleopatra, lustful queen."

There mark'd I Helen, for whose sake so long  
The time was fraught with evil; there the great  
Achilles, who with love fought to the end.  
Paris I saw, and Tristan; and beside,  
A thousand more he show'd me, and by name  
Pointed them out, whom love bereaved of life.

When I had heard my sage instructor name  
Those dames and knights of antique days, o'erpower'd  
By pity, well - nigh in amaze my mind  
Was lost; and I began: "Bard! willingly  
I would address those two together coming,  
Which seem so light before the wind." He thus:  
"Note thou, when nearer they to us approach.  
Then by that love which carries them along,

Entreat; and they will come." Soon as the wind  
Sway'd them towards us, I thus framed my speech:  
"O wearied spirits! come, and hold discourse  
With us, if by none else restrain'd. As doves  
By fond desire invited, on wide wings  
And firm, to their sweet nest returning home,  
Cleave the air, wafted by their will along;  
Thus issued, from that troop where Dido ranks,  
They, through the ill air speeding: with such force  
My cry prevail'd, by strong affection urged.

"O gracious creature and benign! who go'st  
Visiting, through this element obscure,  
Us, who the world with bloody stain imbrued;  
If, for a friend, the King of all, we own'd,  
Our prayer to him should for thy peace arise,  
Since thou hast pity on our evil plight.  
Of whatsoever to hear or to discourse  
It pleases thee, that will we hear, of that  
Freely with thee discourse, while e'er the wind,  
As now, is mute. The land,[1] that gave me birth,  
Is situate on the coast, where Po descends  
To rest in ocean with his sequent streams.

[1: "The land." Ravenna.]

"Love, that in gentle heart is quickly learnt,  
Entangled him by that fair form, from me  
Ta'en in such cruel sort, as grieves me still:  
Love, that denial takes from none beloved,  
Caught me with pleasing him so passing well,  
That, as thou seest, he yet deserts me not.  
Love brought us to one death: Caina[2] waits  
The soul, who spilt our life." Such were their words;  
At hearing which, downward I bent my looks,  
And held them there so long, that the bard cried:  
"What art thou pondering?" I in answer thus:  
"Alas! by what sweet thoughts, what fond desire  
Must they at length to that ill pass have reach'd!"  
Then turning, I to them my speech address'd,

[2: "Caina." The place to which murderers are doomed.]

And thus began: "Francesca![3] your sad fate  
Even to tears my grief and pity moves.  
But tell me; in the time of your sweet sighs,  
By what, and how Love granted, that ye knew  
Your yet uncertain wishes?" She replied:  
"No greater grief than to remember days

Of joy, when misery is at hand. That kens  
Thy learn'd instructor. Yet so eagerly  
If thou art bent to know the primal root,  
From whence our love gat being, I will do  
As one, who weeps and tells his tale. One day,  
For our delight we read of Lancelot,[4]  
How him love thrall'd. Alone we were, and no  
Suspicion near us. Oft - times by that reading  
Our eyes were drawn together, and the hue  
Fled from our alter'd cheek. But at one point  
Alone we fell. When of that smile we read,  
The wished smile so raptoriously kiss'd  
By one so deep in love, then he, who ne'er  
From me shall separate, at once my lips  
All trembling kiss'd. The book and writer both  
Were love's purveyors. In its leaves that day  
We read no more." While thus one spirit spake,  
The other wail'd so sorely, that heart - struck  
I, through compassion fainting, seem'd not far  
From death, and like a corse fell to the ground.

[3: "Francesca." Francesca, the daughter of Guido da Polenta, Lord of Ravenna, was given by her father in marriage to Gianciotto, son of Malatesta, Lord of Rimini, a man of extraordinary courage, but deformed in his person. His brother Paolo, who unhappily possessed those graces which the husband of Francesca wanted, engaged her affections; and being taken in adultery, they were both put to death by the enraged Gianciotto.]

[4: "Lancelot." One of the Knights of the Round Table, and the lover of Ginevra, or Guinever, celebrated in romance. The incident alluded to seems to have made a strong impression on the imagination of Dante, who introduces it again, in the Paradise, Canto xvi.]