

Assignment Discovery Lesson Plan Great Books: Dante's Inferno

Curriculum Focus
Literature

Grade level
9-12

Duration
One or two class periods

Objectives
Students will

- discuss the main ideas in *The Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri
- create a geography of hell that includes nine circles with specific sins identified for each circle;
- identify a guide for their journey; and
- determine what constitutes moral redemption in their geography of hell.

Materials

- Paper, pens, pencils
- Copies of the book *The Inferno*, by Dante Alighieri
- Poster board and markers
- Computer
- *Great Books: Dante's Inferno* video and TV/VCR

Procedures

1. Begin the lesson by discussing the main ideas in *The Inferno*. Help students understand that the author, Dante Alighieri, claims that before achieving moral redemption, an individual must take a hard look at evil both in the world and in himself. Only by confronting inner evil can people achieve self-knowledge, which is the first step toward redemption.

Dante also says that people should not be expected to make their journey alone; they need a guide to help them. For Dante's own journey, as described in his book, he chose the poet Virgil to guide him through hell.

2. Review with students Dante's nine circles of hell, which are summarized below:
 - Limbo, which includes people waiting to see if they enter heaven or descend to hell.
 - Lustful, Gluttonous, Avaricious. These three circles represent sins of weakness. They are mostly harmful things that we do to ourselves.

- Wrathful, Heretics (those who betrayed others), and Violent. These three circles represent sins of malice. They were premeditated and usually involved actions toward other people.
 - The Fraudulent and the Treacherous. These last two circles represent sins of betrayal and pride, considered the worst sins of all. Satan, who betrayed God, represents the epitome of evil.
3. To give students a visual image of what Dante's vision of hell may have looked like, show the first several minutes of the video; pay particular attention to the scenes that portray the first circles of hell and the final two circles.
 4. Divide the class into groups of three or four students. Explain that their task of each group is to develop a geography of hell based on their life experiences. Have students decide which sins belong inside each circle of hell. If students think Dante's circles are appropriate, they can use them. To complete their portrayal of hell, have students select a guide and brainstorm ideas about the meaning of moral redemption.
 5. Tell students that they can draw their geography of hell on a piece of poster board or create it on the computer. Students should include two or three paragraphs describing the meaning of each circle, why that circle belongs in hell, the reason for selecting a particular guide, and an explanation of moral redemption.
 6. Give students time in class to complete their projects. Then have students share their posters or computer printouts. Did most students come up with similar ideas, or are their geographies of hell unique? Who did students select as their guides, and why? Finally, what are students' ideas about moral redemption?
 7. Conclude the lesson by discussing what students learned from this activity. Did they find it relevant to their own experiences? What did students learn about themselves as a result of thinking about these issues?

Evaluation:

Use the following three-point rubric to evaluate students' work during this lesson.

3 points: Students thought very creatively in developing their geography of hell, carefully selected an appropriate guide for the journey, and wrote clear, well-constructed descriptive paragraphs.

2 points: Students thought creatively in developing their geography of hell, selected a guide for their journey, and wrote adequate somewhat descriptive paragraphs.

1 point: Students had difficulty developing their geography of hell, did not select a guide for their journey, and did not complete the descriptive paragraphs.

Vocabulary **Dante Alighieri**

Definition: An Italian poet who lived from 1265 to 1321, considered one of the greatest poets of the Middle Ages

Context: *The Inferno* is the first book in Dante Alighieri's famous trilogy *The Divine Comedy*; the other two books are *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*.

inferno

Definition: Literally, intense heat; also used to refer to a place with the characteristics of hell.

Context: Since the publication of *The Inferno* in about 1308, the word "inferno" has become synonymous with the concept of hell.

moral redemption

Definition: The capacity to transcend one's own limitations and reach a new level of self-knowledge

Context: According to Dante, the road to moral redemption can be reached only after confronting evil in the world and in one's self.

nine circles of hell

Definition: The designation of different kinds of sins beginning with sins of weakness, moving down to sins of malice, followed by sins of fraud and disloyalty, and finally descending to sins of betrayal and pride

Context: The image of Satan frozen in ice in the last of Dante's nine circles of hell is a powerful symbol of pure evil.

Virgil

Definition: A poet who lived in ancient Rome between 70 and 19 B.C., considered one of the great poets of world literature

Context: Dante may have selected Virgil as his guide through hell because Virgil was a great literary and moral role model.

National Standards

The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has developed national standards to provide guidelines for teaching English language arts, with the goal of promoting literacy. To become a member of the NCTE, or to view the standards online, go to <http://www.ncte.org/standards/standards.shtml>

This lesson plan addresses the following NCTE standards:

- Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features.
- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate and synthesize data from a variety of sources to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

Credit

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