

Dante Short Essay Topics

A good undergraduate literature paper should be concerned primarily with a careful and detailed analysis of a particular character, theme, or passage in a particular work or works. Your paper should pose some kind of argument about your topic, in the sense that it should advance an idea that someone might disagree with. You are not required to use secondary literature for these papers. Your primary aim should be to construct a meaningful reading of some aspect of Dante's work that stays close to the text as it develops. You should support your claims with quotations, but you should also carefully analyze those quotations—don't assume that the meaning is transparent. And remember, all the normal rules of composition still apply: focused thesis statement, strong topic sentences, unified paragraphs, and thorough analysis. Please refer to the *MLA Style Manual* for proper citation forms and other formatting issues. Dante's poems are typically cited with reference to the canto and line numbers separated by a period using Arabic numerals, e.g.: *Inferno* 26.23-28.

If you decide to use secondary literature, do not use it as a replacement for your own analysis. Secondary literature is best used as a point-of-departure for amplifying a particular point, or for introducing an idea that you plan to argue against.

For suggestions on writing about literature, see the "Handouts" section of my web page:

<http://www.longwoodshakespeare.net/handouts>

Commentaries and resources are also available on the Dante Study Guide on my web page.

Topics for paper #1:

1. Do a close reading of a passage of 15-25 lines or so. Use my Poetry Explication Checklist as a guide, but make sure you organize it around a focused thesis argument. Make sure you look at the Italian to see if anything interesting stands out.
2. How does Dante use poetry as an art form to explore issues of theology? Find some aspect of the poem that amplifies a particular Thomistic doctrine, or other theological idea, or a passage from the Bible. How does Dante use literary art to ask questions about or force us to think about these ideas? If you choose a Biblical quotation (use the footnotes to find these, by the way), make sure you use the Douay-Rheims translation.
3. How does Dante incorporate ideas, stories, and history from pagan antiquity into his Christian poem?
4. What political ideas does Dante explore, and how does he explore them?
5. Take an example of Dante's use of *contrapasso* and explain how it relates to the sin in creative and unusual ways.

Topics for paper #2: TBA.