

## Dante's Divine Comedy

### Introduction

Dante took the world to hell and back. The thirteenth-century poet's most enduring work, *The Divine Comedy*, is an epic, three-volume journey through hell (*Inferno*), purgatory (*Purgatorio*), and heaven (*Paradiso*). Perhaps the most famous of the three parts is *Inferno*, which describes in great, gory detail the nine layers of hell and the punishments of those imprisoned there. Dante's main achievement, however, in *The Divine Comedy* is that he transformed and elevated Italian literature to world-class status with his philosophical and poetic writing. In the seven centuries since its publication, Dante's masterpiece has continued to influence thinkers, artists, and authors from every major period that followed, including the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. Who knew that hell would sound so good?

### Biography

**Dante Alighieri** was born in Florence, Italy, in late May of 1265. Florence at that time was an independent city-state, and Italy was made up of many separate, often warring states, with the popes ruling one area themselves and deeply involved in the politics and wars of the day. Dante's family was of the minor nobility, with some landed property that brought in rent, but not enough to live on. Dante's father was a notary and a moneylender.

When he was almost nine, on the first of May in 1274, Dante saw Beatrice Portinari for the first time at a May celebration. His love for her immediately became one of the most important forces in his life, and it remained so until he died. Marriages were arranged for family reasons at the time, and he could never hope to marry her. He was formally betrothed to a woman named Gemma Donati in 1277, when he was eleven and she was ten, and presumably they were actually married and began to live together as husband and wife when he was nineteen. They had four children, but Dante never speaks of his wife in his poetry. Beatrice also married, in 1287.

As a boy, Dante found the blessedness of his life in going where he could see Beatrice, and when he was eighteen she spoke to him for the first time. He began writing poetry to her, and after she died in 1290 he gathered the poems together, wrote a narrative around them, and circulated the resulting book under the title *La Vita Nuova di Dante Alighieri* (The New Life). The book makes clear that he considers that she has been a personal revelation of Divine Love for him, as Christ was for all of humanity, and he expresses at the end of the book his ambition to "write of her what was never said of any other woman."

During these years Dante also fought in several campaigns waged by Florence against other city-states, and he became known as a promising poet. He turned to philosophy for consolation after Beatrice's death, and he educated himself, gaining an incredible mastery of the learning of his time. He also became seriously interested in the politics of the day and began to hold public office. In June of 1300, he was elected as one of the priors, the highest officials in Florence, and held that office for the usual two months.

The two parties that were at war in much of Italy were the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, the former tending to support the pope's claims to power and the latter those of the Holy Roman Emperor. Dante's Florence was Guelph, but the Guelphs had split into the Blacks

and the Whites, and Dante was a White. Extreme and vindictive Blacks, with the help of Boniface VIII, a pope Dante despised for his pride and ambition, forcibly took power in Florence in 1301, and Dante, along with many other Whites, was accused on trumped-up charges of graft while in office. Fortunately, he was out of town at the time, and he never returned, knowing he could not hope for a fair trial. The Blacks passed sentence on him in absentia, he lost all his property, and if he had returned he would have been burned at the stake.

At first Dante looked for a purely political solution to the troubles of the day, and wrote in favor of the power of the Holy Roman Emperor, hoping that one just universal authority would bring an end to the constant warfare of the time. Dante argued that the Church should confine itself to religious matters; he saw the political ambitions of the papacy as causing nothing but trouble. He also hoped that a knowledge of philosophy would improve human behavior. Then, probably around 1309, Dante began to focus on the writing of his great work, his *Commedia*, later called *La Divina Commedia*, hoping to bring his readers and his world from misery to happiness by his vision of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. As the first part of his work began to be circulated, many recognized him as the greatest poet in Italy. Minstrels sang parts of the work, and some of the less educated used to shrink from him when he entered a city, seeing him as a man who had walked through Hell.

Exile was always bitter for Dante, and at first he had been dependent on what was almost charity, but as his work became better known, he found kind and generous patrons, and in 1318, when he was fifty-three, one such patron persuaded him to move to Ravenna, where his whole family joined him, and he finished the *Paradiso*. He never gave up the desire to return to Florence and be crowned with the laurel wreath there, but otherwise he seems to have been quite happy in Ravenna. In 1321, returning from a successful diplomatic mission, Dante caught malaria and died, at fifty-six. He was buried in Ravenna, and there his bones still are, though eventually Florence tried repeatedly to get them.

Dante created Italian as a unified language and has always inspired intense national pride. Many even of the less educated know long passages of Dante by heart. Italians are often horrified to find how little Americans know about Dante-but to those who do know Dante they open their hearts. By all those who love poetry in the rest of the world he is recognized as a supreme poet, "the central man of all the world," as the English essayist John Ruskin called him.

## Summary

The *Divine Comedy* is a narrative poem describing Dante's imaginary journey. Midway on his journey through life Dante realizes he has taken the wrong path. The Roman poet Virgil searches for the lost Dante at the request of Beatrice; he finds Dante in the woods on the evening of Good Friday in the year 1300 and serves as a guide as Dante begins his religious pilgrimage to find God. To reach his goal, Dante passes through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

The *Divine Comedy* was not titled as such by Dante; his title for the work was simply *Commedia* or *Comedy*. Dante's use of the word "comedy" is medieval by definition. To Dante and his contemporaries, the term "comedy" meant a tale with a happy ending, not a funny story as the word has since come to mean.

The Divine Comedy is made up of three parts, corresponding with Dante's three journeys: Inferno, or "Hell"; Purgatorio, or "Purgatory"; and Paradiso, or "Paradise." Each part consists of a prologue and approximately 33 cantos. Since the narrative poem is in an exalted form with a hero as its subject, it is an epic poem.

Dante and Virgil enter the wide gates of Hell and descend through the nine circles of Hell. In each circle they see sinners being punished for their sins on earth; Dante sees the torture as Divine justice. The sinners in the circles include:

Circle One - Those in limbo  
Circle Two - The lustful  
Circle Three - The gluttonous  
Circle Four - The hoarders  
Circle Five - The wrathful  
Circle Six - The heretics  
Circle Seven - The violent  
Ring 1. Murderers, robbers, and plunderers  
Ring 2. Suicides and those harmful to the world  
Ring 3. Those harmful against God, nature, and art, as well as usurers  
Circle Eight - The Fraudulent  
Bowge (Trench) I. Panderers and Seducers  
Bowge II. Flatterers  
Bowge III. Simoniacs  
Bowge IV. Sorcerers  
Bowge V. Barrators  
Bowge VI. Hypocrites  
Bowge VII. Thieves  
Bowge VIII. Counselors  
Bowge IX. Sowers of Discord  
Bowge X. Falsifiers  
Circle Nine - Traitors  
Region i: Traitors to their kindred  
Region ii: Traitors to their country  
Region iii: Traitors to their guests  
Region iv: Traitors to their lords

On Easter Sunday, Dante emerges from Hell. Through his travels, he has found his way to God and is able, once more, to look upon the stars.

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A. P. Davis. "Dante's Inferno: Introduction." [eNotes: Dante's Inferno](http://www.enotes.com/dantes-inferno/introduction). Ed. Penny Satoris. Seattle: Enotes.com Inc, October 2002. [eNotes.com](http://www.enotes.com). 29 August 2010. <<http://www.enotes.com/dantes-inferno/introduction>>.