

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Divine Comedy (1320)

Dante Alighieri

OVERVIEW

Abandon all hope, ye who enter here (Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate). These famous words are inscribed over the entrance to Hell in Dante Alighieri's narrative poem, *The Divine Comedy (La divina commedia)*. Published in 1320, this poem recounts a fictionalized Dante's journey through three realms of the Christian afterlife: Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*), and Paradise (*Paradiso*). In each realm, Dante is accompanied by a guide and he encounters souls – both historical and fictional – who broaden his understanding of the afterlife and the human condition. The poem begins in the spring of 1300 with Dante, age thirty-five, lost in the woods and ends with his transcendent encounter with God one week later.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Dante, in a departure from his contemporaries, chose to write *The Divine Comedy* in the vernacular dialect of Florence, Italian, rather than Latin. For this reason, he is considered the father of Italian language. Along with poets Petrarch (1304-1374) and Boccaccio (1313-1375), Dante (1265-1321) is one of the 'three crowns' of Italian literature.

The Divine Comedy is not a "comedy" in the modern sense of the word, but refers to the fact that the narrative ends happily. The poem is written in the first person and is informed by the author's Catholic faith. It also incorporates autobiographical elements from his life: his admiration for Beatrice Portinari, his literary aspirations, his political career, and his exile.

Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* in *terza rima*, a rhyming verse form consisting of three-line stanzas. The number three recurs throughout the epic and it is one of most noticeable patterns. For example, the poem is set in the year 1300 and it is separated into three books (*Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*). Each book contains thirty-three cantos, or sections, with one additional canto serving as a prologue. Beyond the structure of the poem, the numbers three and seven are significant to Christian numerology as reflected in Dante's organization of Hell (nine circles), Purgatory (seven terraces) and Paradise (nine spheres).

MAIN CHARACTERS

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| Dante: | Dante is the protagonist of the poem. |
| Virgil: | Virgil is Dante's first guide |
| Beatrice: | Beatrice is Dante's second guide |
| Saint Bernard: | Saint Bernard of Clairvaux is Dante's third guide |

STORY

1. The Inferno

Meeting the guide The poem opens with Dante lost in a dark wood where he encounters a leopard, a lion, and a shewolf. As he flees, a figure appears and Dante calls out for help. The figure introduces himself as Virgil, the Roman poet and Dante's literary inspiration. Virgil offers to serve as Dante's guide and lead him out of the wilderness and through the *Inferno*.

Crossing the river Together they pass through a gate, on the other side of which Dante hears screams in several languages. These voices belong to those who were neither loyal to God nor rebellious against Him. The uncommitted shades run in pursuit of a banner along the shores of the Acheron River, bleeding and weeping, chased by wasps and flies. Dante recognizes some of the faces before Virgil leads him to the ferryman, Charon, who ferries them across the river.

Pagans Dante arrives at the first circle of Hell, Limbo, which is populated by the souls of the unbaptized, including children and virtuous pagans. This is the circle where Virgil resides, alongside other Greek and Roman poets, military leaders, and philosophers.

The lustful and gluttonous Dante passes into the second circle where he encounters Minos, who judges the weight of each soul and assigns them a place in Hell. The second circle holds the souls of the lustful, who are swept up into a violent hurricane. In the third circle, described as cold and raining, Dante finds a three-headed beast, Cerberus, clawing at the gluttonous souls lying in the muck.

Hoarders and squanderers As Dante reaches the fourth circle of Hell, he notes that there are more souls here than in previous circles. These souls are divided into two groups, those who hoarded wealth, and those who squandered it. Both groups are condemned to push weights with their chests and collide painfully with one another. Virgil identifies several cardinals, popes, and clergymen among them, and later leads Dante to a marshy river, the Styx, where the souls of the wrathful are fighting in the mud. Virgil reveals that beneath the surface are the sullen, choking on mud. Moving on from this circle, the two arrive at the City of Dis. After an angel intervenes, Dante and Virgil enter the city, where they find the stone tombs of heretics on fire.

The violent and the suicides Dante and his guide climb down a steep bank, passing by a river of boiling blood where the souls of those who committed violence against others reside. Beyond the river is an unmarked wood of dark, knotted and crooked trees, the contorted bodies of those who committed suicide. Next to the trees is a plain of sand where Dante sees blasphemers laying down as flakes of fire fall from the sky.

Sodomites and moneylenders He also notices those who walk along the plain – including his former mentor, Brunetto Latini – suggesting that they are guilty of sodomy. Near the edge of a waterfall, Virgil asks Dante for the cord around his waist and drops it into the water. The beast with a human face, Geryon, rises up. While Virgil speaks with it, Dante wanders over to a group of people sitting in the sand. Each person has a purse around their neck, representative of their family and of usury, or moneylending. After Dante concludes his examination, he returns to Virgil and climbs onto Geryon's back. The beast flies them to another section of Hell, disappearing once Dante and Virgil get down.

Seducers and flatterers Dante describes this section of Hell – Malebolge – as a field constructed of iron stones with a deep pit surrounded by ten ditches. He sees naked souls in the ditches and two rows of sinners marching along the bank, pursued and whipped by demons. They are revealed to be panders and seducers. Dante later encounters flatterers trapped in excrement and climbs to a ridge where he sees holes in the ground and walls, from which protrude the burning feet and legs of those punished for fraudulent use of the Church. Dante condemns the corruption of the papacy before continuing on.

The corrupt and deceitful Moving from bridge to bridge, he observes seers and astrologers with their heads twisted around backwards, the politically corrupt in a pit of boiling tar, hypocrites bearing heavy, gilded iron cloaks, and thieves whose hands are tied behind their backs by snakes. Dante also describes those who counseled deceit trapped within moving flames; the bloody mutilation of those who sowed discord; and those guilty of falsifying, such as alchemists, imposters, counterfeiters, and perjurers, diseased and confined to a festering pit. Finally, Dante reaches the center of Malebolge which is guarded by giants. One giant lifts Dante and Virgil in his hand and lowers them into Cocytus, the bottom of Hell.

Traitors Dante arrives at a large frozen lake where souls of traitors are trapped in ice from the neck down. He speaks with several infamous traitors from history, before he finds a place where the shades are entirely encased in ice and unable to speak. At the center of Cocytus is Satan, described as having three heads and six wings. Each of his mouths holds a traitor: Judas, Brutus, and Cassius. Dante and Virgil escape from Hell by climbing down Satan's furred and immobile body, then up through a stone into a dimly lit dungeon. Virgil leads Dante outside to see the stars.

2. The Purgatorio

Ascending a mountain Dante's journey into Purgatory begins on a shoreline. He and Virgil are met by the virtuous pagan Cato, who urges Dante to wash the stains of Hell from his face before meeting the angel who will ferry him to the mountain of Purgatory. As the light of dawn fills the sky, Dante joins other Christian souls for the crossing, and upon arriving at the base of the mountain, he and Virgil begin to climb. Unsure how to proceed, Dante notices a group of souls moving towards them. A brief exchange reveals they are excommunicated, and delayed from reaching Paradise.

Kneeling at the steps Later, they encounter more shades: those who postponed asking for penance, those who repented shortly before death, and leaders who neglected their spiritual well-

being. At Purgatory's entrance, Dante identifies a crevice within a portal, and three steps to climb. Virgo advises Dante to kneel before the angel at the top of the steps and ask humbly to pass. When he does, the guard agrees but carves seven 'P's into Dante's forehead, representing the 7 sins.

Crossing the threshold Dante crosses the threshold into the first terrace of Purgatory, where he notices marble statues depicting moments of humility in Christian theology and Roman history. Dante soon meets hunched shades whose punishment for pride is to carry heavy stones on their backs. Upon reaching the gate to the second terrace of Purgatory, Dante greets another angelic guard, who removes one of the 'P's from his forehead and allows him to cross the threshold.

Erasing the sins Dante and Virgil reach the top of the staircase to the second terrace, where they hear disembodied voices expressing sentiments of generosity. Then Dante sees the souls of the envious dressed in sackcloths with their eyes sewn shut with iron wire. As Virgil and Dante continue their journey, the latter is blinded by the arrival of an angel who wipes another 'P' from his head. Passing through smoke in his ascent to the third terrace, he listens to voices calling for peace and mercy, a prayer offered in opposition to the sin of Wrath. He experiences visions of biblical and classical wrath before an angel removes another 'P' from his forehead.

An earthquake Close to midnight, Dante reaches the next terrace and watches as a crowd of shades runs past him. Two shades cry out examples of haste and ardor. This is the terrace for Sloth. With another angelic encounter, Dante climbs the steps to the fifth terrace, where he overhears examples of virtuous poverty. The shades in this section of Purgatory lay facedown on the ground, punished for Greed. While on this terrace, Dante experiences an earthquake, which is later revealed by another shade, the Roman poet Statius, to occur each time a soul is purified in Purgatory and ascends to Paradise. With the removal of another 'P', Dante continues to the next terrace along with Virgil and Statius, who discuss the Roman poets residing in Limbo.

Temperance The conversation is interrupted by the enticing smell of an apple tree in the middle of the road. Dante hears voices in the trees provide examples of temperance in the consumption of food. These examples are intended as a counterpoint to the gluttonous souls Dante soon encounters: these individuals appear to be gaunt from starvation, extending their hands towards the leaves of trees they cannot reach to satiate their hunger or thirst. Following Dante's encounter with another angel, the trio are granted permission to move forward.

A wall of flames Dante reaches the seventh terrace where he sees a wall of flames, and shades which pass through the fire, reciting a hymn and examples of chastity. Two groups run through the flames, and Dante observes them exchanging kisses and shouting biblical and classical examples of lust. Dante encounters the angel of this terrace, who informs him that he cannot move forward without passing through the flames.

The mountain top When he hesitates, Virgil urges him to trust in his guide and reminds him that he will find Beatrice on the other side of the wall. Dante is persuaded to cross the fire along with Virgil and Statius, and as the sun sets, he falls asleep. When he awakens the next morning, he completes his ascent to the top of the mountain where he finds a beautiful forest.

Beatrice and confession Eventually, Dante encounters Beatrice, who appears out of a cloud of flowers as a beautiful woman accompanied by angels. Her arrival marks the disappearance of Virgil as she takes over as Dante's guide. Before Dante can move on, Beatrice requires him to give a confession, admitting to his sins. Once he does so, Beatrice submerges him in the River Lethe, which erases memory. He is then permitted to drink from another river, reviving his virtuous memories. At this point, Dante is ready to ascend to Paradise.

3. The Paradiso:

The moon This section begins with Dante and Beatrice looking up into the sun, beyond which are the celestial spheres. The two of them soar towards Heaven, so quickly that Dante doesn't realize he is no longer on earth until Beatrice points this out to him. They enter the first sphere of the moon, where Dante sees what he believes to be faint reflections of faces. Beatrice assures him these are not reflections, but rather the souls of those who broke holy vows. She urges him to speak with the spirits, and Dante listens to the stories of two former nuns who were forced to give up their vows for political marriages.

Mercury Dante and Beatrice rise to the second sphere, Mercury, where he describes souls surging

towards them in joyous greeting. The soul of Emperor Justinian resides in this honorable sphere and recounts his history to Dante, after which he disappears with the singing of a hymn. Dante and Beatrice make their way to the next sphere, associated with Venus, where dancing lights descend to join them. These lights represent souls who are full of spiritual love, not the carnality of souls in Purgatory or Hell.

The Sun Following his conversations with these souls, Dante and Beatrice join the sphere of the Sun, where they are surrounded by a ring of twelve singing souls. Thomas Aquinas, the philosopher and Dominican friar, introduces himself and his fellow lights, all of whom have the reputation of great wisdom. A second ring of twelve souls joins the procession, and are introduced by Saint Bonaventure, a Franciscan friar. Aquinas and Bonaventure celebrate the origins of the Dominican and Franciscan orders while lamenting the corruption of those orders.

Mars Dante and Beatrice are elevated to the next sphere, Mars, where he notices the stars are arranged in the Milky Way to give the appearance of the cross. These stars double as souls, who at first sing to and then address Dante, revealing themselves to be warriors for God. In this sphere, Dante has the chance to learn more about the history of Florence and his own impending exile before transitioning to the next sphere, where the lights spell out a message in Latin: "Love justice, you who are judges of earth."

Jupiter This is the sphere of Jupiter, of the just and virtuous rulers, whose souls take the form of an eagle in the sky. The eagle speaks for all of the souls, who converse with Dante on the nature of divine justice. Then the eagle sings a hymn, as a multitude of voices, before it resumes speaking with one voice. It identifies six great kings whose souls make up the eagle's eye, including two kings Dante presumed to be pagans.

Saturn Dante notices that Beatrice is no longer smiling. She informs him that if she were to smile, as radiant as she is, he would turn to dust. The higher they ascend, the more divinely beautiful she becomes, and there is a limit to what Dante, as a mortal man, is capable of perceiving. She directs his attention to the sphere of Saturn, where he notices a golden ladder. The souls gather like birds, moving up and down the rungs.

The inhabitants of this sphere exercise temperance, as seen in the way they do not sing in order to protect Dante's mortal senses (as Beatrice does). They embody monastic virtues in life, and over the course of his conversations in this sphere, Dante is informed that he will see God's vengeance exercised against the corruptions of the Church and its representatives.

The stars Dante moves on to the next sphere among the fixed stars, where he follows Beatrice's gaze to the sun in the sky. This sphere contains thousands of lights above which Dante sees a vision of Jesus Christ, whose radiance temporarily blinds him. When he recovers, he finds that he is now able to look upon Beatrice as she smiles, and he recognizes venerated figures in Christianity.

Test of faith Beatrice addresses the Apostles and Saint Peter on Dante's behalf, resulting in the souls forming a radiant sphere of light. Saint Peter circles Beatrice three times and she requests that he test Dante's faith; he agrees and asks Dante a series of questions about the nature, truth, and sources of faith. At the conclusion of his test, Saint Peter praises the poet with a chant and dances around him three times.

Test of hope Next, Beatrice invokes Saint James to test Dante on hope, an examination which he passes. He temporarily loses his vision once more as he is joined by Saint John.

Test of love John tests Dante on the subject of love, and upon successfully completing this examination, his vision is restored. The next soul that appears belongs to Adam. Dante learns more about Adam's creation and experience in the Garden of Eden.

Ascent to heaven Dante ascends to the ninth sphere of Heaven with Beatrice where he sees God as a point of radiating light, surrounded by the hierarchy of angels. Beatrice is replaced by Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, who facilitates Dante's most direct encounter with God through a prayer to the Virgin Mary. Dante sees a vision of God before he is returned to his mortal body, at which point he cannot describe the specifics of the revelation. However, the divine love associated with that revelation remains with him.

THEMES

Justice: One of the prevailing themes of this poem is divine justice. Even when Dante is moved to pity for the shades he encounters in Hell and Purgatory, there is no doubt that God's judgement is perfect. This is illustrated by Dante's consistent representation of punishment in both the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*. Punishments physically reflect the sin for which the shade is condemned: for example, in the *Inferno*, astrologers and seers have their necks twisted backwards so they can no longer "predict" their way forward. In the *Purgatorio*, those who were proud in life are now forced to bow low under the weight of stones on their backs. This concept - the punishment fits the sin - is known as *contrapasso*.

Salvation: Linked to the theme of divine justice is the possibility and pursuit of salvation. One characteristic of the souls in Hell - with the exception of Limbo - is the refusal to take responsibility for their sins. For example, lovers Francesca and Paolo blame their adultery on a book, and the blasphemous Capaneus continues to curse God as he burns. Whereas a lack of repentance is demonstrated in the *Inferno*, there is a marked shift in tone in Purgatory, because repentance is a prerequisite and the suffering is temporary. Salvation is achieved through the actions of the penitent souls, who express the desire to purify themselves through their assigned punishments, and through the prayers of their loved ones. In the *Paradiso*, Beatrice informs Dante that while the souls in Heaven are designated to one of nine spheres, they are equally blessed to be a part of God.

Exile: Dante was exiled from his native Florence in 1302 and he remained in exile for the rest of his life, and exile, both physical and spiritual, is a central theme in this work. Dante's own exile is predicted by the souls he encounters in the *Inferno* and the *Paradiso*. In the beginning of Canto XXV of the *Paradiso*, Dante expresses the hope that *The Divine Comedy* might persuade those who exiled him to welcome him back to Florence, revealing an underlying motivation for this project. Dante's sense of displacement is also established at the outset of the poem, which opens with the poet lost in an unfamiliar location. Beyond the autobiographical references, Dante emphasizes throughout the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* that separation from God's light and love is the most painful form of exile.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dante

Character: The fictionalized Dante is a middle-aged poet and Christian who stands in for the reader: he is curious, asking questions of his guides, and often overwhelmed by what he encounters during this spiritual journey. He is generally compassionate (with a few notable exceptions) towards the shades he encounters in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, and as he progresses, he reflects on his own virtues and vices. Dante is also an autobiographical figure who grapples with the author's personal experiences in Florentine politics.

Illustrative Moments:

Courageous: At the outset of the *Inferno*, Dante hesitates to continue and expresses doubts that he is worthy of undertaking his journey. Virgil reassures him that Beatrice, a heavenly figure, has interceded on his behalf and that there is a divine purpose behind his pilgrimage. This renews Dante's courage moving forward, and he follows Virgil's direction through the *Inferno*, undeterred by the monsters, demons, and torments he encounters. In Canto XVII, Virgil climbs onto the back of the beast, Geryon, to continue their descent. Dante trembles out of fear but he does not voice this anxiety to his mentor, joining him. The flight down to Malebolge is terrifying and disorienting for Dante, but he endures it without complaint. His courage is thus defined not as the absence of fear, but the willingness to persevere.

Compassionate: One of Dante's most notable qualities in the early cantos of the *Inferno* is his compassion for the shades who are suffering. Crossing the threshold into Hell, Dante is so overwhelmed by the cries of the damned that he begins to weep. As his journey continues, he stops to speak to those who call out to him, fulfilling the requests of his contemporaries to share news of Florence. When he encounters his former mentor, Brunetto Latini, Dante greets the shade respectfully, using a formal "you" and honorific. He expresses the wish to see Latini freed from his "banishment," and offers his gratitude for all he has been taught. Dante's compassion emphasizes his role as a stand-in for the reader, because he is aware of his own fallibility as a human being. He acknowledges twice in the *Purgatorio* that he is susceptible to pride, and is anxious about ending up among those shades on the first terrace.

Autobiographical Figure: There is significant overlap between Dante and the fictionalized Dante. Both are poets, critical of the corruption of the church, and affiliated with the White Guelphs, a political party that fell out of favor in Florence in 1302. Dante includes his contemporaries in his poem, providing insight into the social and political tensions among medieval Italian nobility. As much as *The Divine Comedy* is about what awaits us after death, there is also a preoccupation with what we leave behind: our legacy. In the *Purgatorio*, Dante encounters souls who express a desire for their loved ones to pray on their behalf so that they may enter Paradise sooner. In this sense, legacy can be understood in terms of living descendants. But the artistic legacy of Dante the author is also central to this work, completed shortly before his death. In choosing Virgil as his guide, Dante expresses the desire to be counted among the great poets.

Virgil

Character

Virgil is Dante's first guide, who rescues him in the woods and accompanies him through the *Inferno* and much of the *Purgatorio*. He is the fictionalized version of the celebrated Roman poet, placed in Limbo as an example of a virtuous pagan. As a mentor, Virgil is characterized as persuasive, wise and protective of his charge.

Illustrative Moments:

Persuasive: In the beginning of the *Inferno*, Dante expresses his uncertainty about moving forward. He is similarly hesitant to cross the fiery wall that separates the last terrace of Purgatory from the mountaintop. In both cases, Virgil succeeds in persuading Dante to continue his journey by appealing to his reason. When Dante doubts that he is worthy to undertake this journey, Virgil counters that he was sent by Beatrice for Dante, revealing that heavenly figures are personally invested in his pilgrimage. In the *Purgatorio*, Virgil reminds Dante of everything they have overcome to reach this juncture, pointing out that Beatrice awaits him on the other side. Although there are limits to Virgil's power – he sometimes fails to persuade demons to cooperate in the *Inferno*, as in his initial effort to enter the City of Dis – he understands what will motivate Dante.

Wise: Dante repeatedly invokes Virgil as a guide, sage, and master. At the beginning of Canto VII, when they encounter the menacing Plutus, Virgil assures Dante that the beast has no power over them and he commands it to be silent. Throughout the *Inferno*, Virgil's wisdom is best represented by his ability to both predict Dante's unspoken questions and to respond to the questions he does voice aloud, demonstrating an intimate familiarity with the organization of Hell and its inhabitants. In Canto VII, he identifies those condemned for greed and reminds Dante that no amount of gold can substitute for spiritual salvation. Virgil also understands the divine rationale for Hell's design which he reveals to Dante in Canto XII. For example, he explains to the poet that fraud is a sin unique to human beings and so angers God more, resulting in a lower position in Hell. Virgil's wisdom is not confined to his knowledge of Hell, but also his advice which helps to guide the mortal Dante on his path to salvation.

Protective: Virgil is protective of Dante throughout the *Inferno*, heightening the reader's awareness that it is not a safe place. From his initial introduction as Dante's guardian in the woods, rescuing him from wild beasts, to his reassurances in the last terrace of Purgatory, Virgil is depicted as both mentor and protector. In Canto VIII of the *Inferno*, when the guards of the City of Dis offer Virgil passage but refuse the same to Dante, Virgil refuses to abandon his charge, and reassures Dante of his right to proceed on this path. Whenever Dante is threatened by the demons in this realm, Virgil intervenes to secure his safety. This protectiveness stems from more than Virgil's obligation as a guide: it also reflects his fondness for the poet, which is evident in the familiar way he addresses Dante as "son."

Beatrice

Character

Beatrice is Dante's second guide, who accompanies him through the final cantos of the *Purgatorio* and most of the *Paradiso*. She is represented as the virtuous savior who, in the early cantos of the *Inferno*, arranges for Virgil to protect Dante in the woods. As a mentor in the *Paradiso*, she encourages Dante to ask questions and corrects his misunderstandings, so that he will be able to share what he has learned with others once he returns to earth.

Illustrative Moments:

Virtuous: Beatrice is established as virtuous intercessor for the poet at the beginning of the *Inferno*, although the reader does not meet her until the end of the *Purgatorio*. It was Beatrice's love for Dante and her concern for his safety that led her to entreat Virgil to intervene as a guide. Her virtue and grace are tied to the place where she appears in *The Divine Comedy*: on the other side of Purgatory. Before Dante is permitted to continue his journey at the end of the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice takes his confession and washes away his memory of sin in the River Lethe. In doing so, she demonstrates both her authority and her purity. As she leads Dante through the spheres of Paradise, she grows increasingly radiant, creating a correlation between her beauty and her virtue.

Mentor: Beatrice's role as a mentor is distinct from Virgil's. In the *Inferno*, Dante is positioned as the student and Virgil as the teacher who dispenses knowledge. Exchanges between Beatrice and Dante are more interactive, as she encourages him to share his thoughts and questions before she corrects him with the explicit motivation of improving his discourse so that he can return to earth and share what he has seen with others. In the final cantos of the *Paradiso*, she also facilitates a series of tests for Dante: on faith, hope, and love. This, too, supports her efforts to empower him with the language he needs in order to describe his experience. Beatrice's significance as a mentor is further emphasized by Dante's prayer to her at the end of the *Paradiso*, where he expresses his gratitude for all that she has taught him.