

Dante Alighieri — 1265 - 1321

A soldier, politician, idealistic lover, man of affairs a lyric poet, a philosopher.

Raised in Florence, Italy, studied the usual classical and medieval texts of rhetoric and theology, poetry and painting.

In 1289 fought courageously in a local Florentine war.

Beatrice Portinari — First saw her when both were nine. He only saw her a few times, and each married others, but she served as his ideal, the inspiration of his life, and in the Divine Comedy as the direct agent of his salvation. By the age of 20 he was writing poems to her in the manner of the troubadours. She died when she was 24.

Political Background — A turbulent one. For 50 years Italy had been torn by civil wars between the Guelphs (supporters of the Papacy) and the Ghibelines (supporters of the authority of the German emperor over Italy). After the Guelphs gained control of Florence, they splintered into the Blacks and the Whites of which Dante and his family belonged. This group representing the urban nobility and the wealthy commercial classes of relatively humble birth wanted Florence to be a strong republic free of pope and emperor. The poor but aristocratic Blacks were willing to compromise with the pope if they could crush the upstart democracy. Dante was not apathetic in these tension-filled times.

In 1295 he joined one of the powerful Florentine guilds and by 1300 he had been elected one of the six guild representatives to govern the city. The feud between the Blacks and the Whites broke out again. Dante and his cogovernors refused to give aid to the papal armies. Pope Boniface threatened vengeance. In 1301 Dante was sent to Rome to seek peace. However, during his absence a coup d'etat put the Blacks into power, and in January, 1302 Dante was fined, exiled, and sentenced to be burned alive should he ever return to Florence. He thus, became an exiled intellectual. He frequently lived with different patrons.

Political beliefs:

separation of church and state

a strong emperor as well as a strong pope

This explains why Judas, traitor to the Church, and also Brutus and Cassius, traitors to the Empire, both reside in the nethermost pit of Hell with Satan

Buried in Ravenna, Italy. Had hoped that the fame of the Divine Comedy would allow him entrance back to Florence, but he died a few weeks before the last cantos, just finished, were found in his study. The city of Florence for centuries has tried to bring his body back to Florence, but he is still buried in Ravenna.

The Divine Comedy

Not a comedy in the modern sense of the word. The title is used because the poem shows the progress from grief to joy (damnation to heavenly bliss) and is written in the vernacular tongue—Italian, not Latin.

Framework:

Dante is lost in a forest and is met by the famous Latin poet Virgil, who through intercession of Beatrice in heaven has been sent to guide him through the world after death, for he has strayed so far that only the spectacle can lead him to salvation. Virgil first leads him through Hell.

Hell = An inverted cone descending by terraces at various levels to its apex at the center of the earth, where Satan himself is confined. From there a subterranean channel leads them to the base of **Purgatory**, a mountain on the opposite side of the earth from Hell, corresponding to it in a general way, being an extrusion caused by the opposite depression. On the terraces of Purgatory the sins of those who are ultimately to be saved are cleansed away, and at its top is the Garden of Eden from which the elect ascend into **Heaven**. Here Virgil leaves Dante, since he cannot enter Heaven. He is then led to Beatrice. Under her guidance he ascends through the concentric spheres of the various planets including the moon and the sun (Remember in Dante's day the earth is still the center of the universe) and on through the fixed stars to the ultimate heaven, the Empyrean. Here Beatrice passes him onto St. Bernard of Clairvaux whose prayers gain for Dante the final magnificence—the vision, for an instant, in which he sees the Trinity itself and the whole universe, down to its last detail; as one vast and coherent whole. At the point of this illumination the poem ends.

Symbolic Use of Numbers:

Based on symbolism of 3's — 3 = the Trinity, the Father, son, and Holy Ghost. $3 \times 3 = 9$. 33 = two 3's together and also the age Christ was crucified. Also 7's and 10's.

Consists of 3 books Heaven (Paradisio) = Salvation, Purgatory (Purgatorio) = Penance, Hell (Inferno) = Sin
Each book contains 33 cantos (chapters)

Each canto consists of stanzas of 3 lines. The rhyme scheme is terza rima (three rhyme). Terza rima is iambic pentameter, with interlocking rhymes, i.e., aba, bcb, cdc, ded, efe, etc.

There is an introductory canto bringing the total number to 100 (10 x 10). To the medieval mind 100=the perfect number.

7's = the seven deadly sins, which comprise the main levels of Hell. Other 7's are present also.

In a letter to his patron Can Grande della Scala, Dante said that the poem has one literal meaning (the account of the journey itself) and several allegorical meanings: Theological—the dark wood is a state of spiritual separation from God; Political—it is the anarchy of Dante's Italy; Morally—it is an unworthy or evil way of life.

Interpretation:

Damned are incapable of repentance; their punishment is a mere continuation of their lives on earth. In fact he saw the relationship so close that some who were still alive during Dante's time already had their souls in Hell.

Dante pities their individual fates and for the loss of their potentialities.

Classification is both theological and moral. Based in part on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. For example, the illicit lovers are above the forgers because their sin is a misapplication of love; whereas, forgery is fraud, which is entirely evil. Dante sees the embezzler as worse than the bank robber because the breach of trust is morally worse than taking by open force from those who have no reason to trust us. Punishments of sinners is symbolically appropriate.

All who enter Hell must leave hope behind because damnation is eternal. "Abandon hope all ye who enter here."

Conversations with those in Hell are concrete, non-philosophical, and non-theological (the opposite occurs in Heaven) because the souls in Hell are unchanged, sinful human beings.

Whole organization is credible. Style is plain, straightforward, neither ornate nor flashy. Always means something and knows what he means. May present a riddle but the riddle always has an answer. Often uses colloquial words, homely expressions, earthy comparisons.

Historical Perspective

Middle Ages - roughly from 500 A.D. to 1450 A.D.

First half often erroneously called the Dark Ages. Covers the collapse of the international trade and government of the Roman Empire, the overrunning of Europe by a group of barbarian tribes, mostly Germanic, the Christianization of these tribes, the development of local government and local economic self-sufficiency, and the beginnings of the feudal system.

Second-half — re-establishment of large scale transportation and communication made possible rise of large cities. Rise of prosperous, independent middle class of merchants and artisans. Feudalism more important as an organization of political power rather than a system of land tenure. Rise of literature, particularly in the vernacular.

Medieval Mind

Essentially allegorical, seeing the visible and material world as a reflection of an invisible moral or spiritual order.

Types - dream allegory

debate - represented a contention between two contrasting or opposing forces, body & soul, flower and leaf, knight and priest.

4 levels of medieval allegory:

- 1st - Literal: what happens, the plot [Dante goes on journey to learn about himself, the world, and the relations between the two]
- 2nd - Allegorical: symbolic, symbolism of characters, elements of setting [See symbolic meanings below]
- 3rd - Moral, thematic: related to human behavior [A cautionary story to warn the reader about the consequences of various categories of behavior. The reader begins to understand sin [Inferno], penance [Purgatorio], and salvation [Paradisio]
- 4th - Anagogic: spiritual or religious interpretation, universal truths. [Gives a mystical vision of God's grand design for the entire universe. Shows the complex interdependency of all things, including the interrelationships stemming from the number symbolism. This is all part of the Divine Plan, which humans can only grasp partially and dimly. God is beyond man's finite capabilities of understanding and his will can never be fully understood by men whose vision has been impaired by sin. Becomes a quest for the spiritually enlightened to approach Eternal Truth.

Concept of Universe

- Ptolemaic (100 A.D.) — Earth centered universe. Concentric rings of planets. This is Dante's view.
- Copernican (1473- 1543) — Attacked the accepted hypothesis of the geocentric (earth-centered) universe. Advanced the idea of a heliocentric (sun-centered) universe.
- Great Chain of Being: A view of the cosmos in which the medieval mind saw life ordered from the top to the bottom. At the top is God, followed by the angels, man [Kings at top, peasants at bottom] animals [Lion is king of the animals, etc.] all the way down to the "scum of the earth." According to the medieval mind everything and everyone had an assigned place on this chain of being. If one were to try to rise above his station or alter the chain's order in any way, major disruptions would occur that could prove to be disastrous. However, a chain is interconnected, so all elements of life are interrelated, one to another. Dante's terza rima, the interlocking rhyme scheme is symbolic of this.

Symbols in The Inferno:

- a. Universal symbols — dark = evil, roads = journey of life, etc.; straight road = Christian way of life. Off the road = unChristian way of life

- b. Symbolic people
 - Beatrice = Divine love, Grace (as in God's grace or forgiveness)
 - Dante = the Christian sinner seeking salvation
 - Virgil = Reason
 - Francesca and Paulo = lust, adultery
- c. Biblical and Classical figures as symbols
 - Minos = the judge of men's souls, man's final judgment
 - Satan = evil
 - Brutus and Cassius = The ultimate sin, treason
 - The repeating 3's = the Trinity—God the father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit [Note the Devil has three faces, why?]
- d. Text-based symbols:
 - The leopard = Fraud = a leopard can deceive because it can hide itself with its spots.
 - The lion = violence
 - The She-wolf = Incontinence = an inability to control oneself = she is ravenous, hungry all the time and can never be satisfied.
 - All the tortuous punishments the damned suffer are symbolic of the sins they committed in life

Greek Mythological Elements in “The Inferno”

1. Many elements come from Greek mythology. According to the Greeks when a person dies, his soul enters the Underworld through a cave in a mountain [like the mountain Dante climbs?] Then the soul boards a small ferry boat and taken by **Charon**, the ferryman, down to the gates of Hades [Dante here combines the Greek Underworld, sometimes called Hades, after the god of the Underworld [whom the Greeks called Pluto] with the Christian concept of Hell. However, the Greek Underworld housed all the dead, good and bad alike, unlike the Christian Hell which houses only the bad souls.] Dante also enters Hell on the river **Acheron**, which also is one of the rivers in the Greek Underworld.
2. Another mix of the two occurs when Dante meets **Minos**, the judge of the damned souls in the 2nd circle of Hell and later the **Minotaur** in the 7th circle . Minos in the Inferno is half man and half snake. He wraps his tail around his body to determine the level of Hell a soul is condemned to. For example, if he wraps his tail around him four times, the soul is condemned to the fourth level of hell. However, Minos appears in Greek mythology, not as a snake like creature but as a king of the island Crete whose son had died when he had been sent by King Aegeus of Athens to kill a dangerous bull. Angered by this lack of hospitality to a guest, Minos had invaded and captured Athens and threatened to burn it to the ground unless the people of Athens sent him a tribute of 7 maidens and 7 youths every nine years. Then when these young people got to Crete, Minos gave them to the Minotaur to devour. The Minotaur was a monster, half man and half bull, the offspring of Minos' wife and a beautiful bull that Poseidon [the Greek god of the sea] had given to Minos so he could sacrifice it to Poseidon. But Minos could not bring himself to kill it, so he kept it for himself. To punish him, Poseidon made Pasiphae, Minos' wife, fall madly in love with the bull. When the Minotaur was born, Minos did not kill it but had Daedalus, a great architect and inventor, build the Labyrinth, a grand maze, for the Minotaur to live in. [In a way, Dante's Hell is like a maze.] Minos would send youths to the Minotaur to be eaten. This continued until the hero Theseus came to Crete. Minos' daughter Ariadne fell in love with Theseus, and she told him the secret to finding his way out of the maze. She gave him a ball of yarn to string behind him so he could find his way out. When he got to the minotaur, Theseus killed him with his bare hands, retraced his steps with the help of the yarn, took Ariadne, and boarded his ship to return to his home in Athens. So Dante's Minos condemns souls to eternal death as the Greek Minos condemned the youths to death. Additionally, Minos appears as one of the three judges of the souls of the Dead in the Underworld. Thus Dante uses the role of judge, but alters his physical appearance.
3. **Cerberus**. In the Inferno, a cruel monster that stands over the souls condemned to an eternity lying deep in mud and bombarded by snow, hail, and stagnant water. This Cerberus barks over the souls and tears at their flesh. The Greek Cerberus was the three-headed dog that guarded the gates of the Underworld. Cerberus would keep all souls from returning to the land of the living.