

The Divine Comedy

Dante Alighieri

Introduction:

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) wrote his epic poem, the *Divine Comedy*, during the last thirteen years of his life (circa 1308-21), while in exile from his native Florence. There are three parts to this massive work: *Inferno*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. In each section Dante the poet recounts the travels of the Pilgrim—his alter ego—through hell, purgatory, and heaven, where he meets God face to face. The primary theme is clear. In a letter to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, Dante wrote that his poem was, on the literal level, about "The state of souls after death." It is, of course, that and much more. The poem works on a number of symbolic levels, much like the Bible, one of its primary sources. Like that sacred text, Dante meant his work and his Pilgrim traveler to serve as models for the reader. He hoped to lead that reader to a greater understanding of his place in the universe and to prepare him for the next life, for the life that begins after death.

The greatness of the *Divine Comedy* lies in its construction as a *summa*, or a summation of knowledge and experience. Dante was able to weave together pagan myth, literature, philosophy; Christian theology and doctrine, physics, astrology, cartography, mathematics, literary theory, history, and politics into a complex poem that a wide audience, not just the highly educated, could read. For Dante boldly chose to write his poem of salvation in his own Italian dialect, not in Latin, which was the language of Church, State, and epic poetry during his time. Its impact was so great that Dante's Tuscan dialect became what we recognize as modern Italian.

As one of the greatest works, not just of the late Middle Ages but of world literature in its entirety, the influence of the *Divine Comedy* has been incalculable. The poem was immediately successful—Dante's own sons, Pietro and Jacopo, wrote the first commentaries on it—and it continues to be read and taught today. Many of western literature's major figures were indebted to Dante's masterwork. A highly selective list includes: Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-75); Geoffrey Chaucer (circa 1344-1400); Don Inigo Lopez de Mendoza, the first Marques de Santillana (1389-1458); John Milton (1608-74); William Blake (1757-1827); Victor Hugo (1802-85); Joseph Conrad (Teodor Josef Konrad Korzeniowski) (1857-1924); James Joyce (1882-1941); Ezra Pound (1885-1972); Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986); and Italo Calvino (1923-85).

If this impressive list were not testament enough, one has only to consider the four to five hundred manuscripts of the *Divine Comedy* in existence (an almost unheard-of number), the four-hundred-some Italian printed editions and the hundreds of English translations to get some idea of this work's impact on Western culture. Clearly, readers have found the *Divine Comedy* relevant to their lives since its composition nearly seven hundred years ago. Perhaps this is because Dante Alighieri, for all the differences between his era and subsequent ones, wrestled with and wrote about concerns that affect all people who have ever stopped to think about them: What is the purpose of this life? Is there an afterlife? If so, how should I prepare for it? Why, in short, am I here? Dante's answers to those questions will not necessarily be the same as those of each of his many readers, but by asking them he forces each reader to ask them, too, and to wonder how to answer them.

The Divine Comedy Summary:

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is bewilderingly complex to the first-time reader, even on the literal level. (This complexity remains after many rereadings, but for many readers, it enhances the poem's appeal rather than hindering the reader's understanding.) Trying to keep track of the poem's more than five hundred characters often produces frustration, as do attempts to sort out thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Florentine politics and the city-state's conflicts with the papacy. However Dante lived during a time when categorization—the orderly arrangement of knowledge—bordered on the obsessional, and his *Divine Comedy* is no exception. Indeed, it is a prime example of this drive to order. Therefore, its very structure helps the reader navigate and make sense of its complex world.

The poem is divided into three books or *cantiche*. *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. Each book is then broken down into *canti* or what we might call chapters: *Inferno* has thirty-four, *Purgatory* has thirty-three, and *Paradise* has thirty-three. There are, then, a total of one hundred *canti*, and each volume has thirty-three chapters. (The first one in *Inferno* introduces the entire poem and thus in a sense stands alone.) This ordering system is a prime example of medieval Christian numerology, the science of attributing religious significance to numerals. In this system, three is the ideal number, since it represents the Holy Trinity: God the Father, Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One hundred, the number of *canti* in the poem, is the square of the perfect number 10. One hundred represents the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are individuals yet indivisible from one another: $100 = 1+0 + 0=1$. This simple example only hints at the extent to which *Divine Comedy* uses such tight structures to produce meaning and to deliver its message of salvation.