Divine Comedy Study Guide

Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri

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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.

Author Biography

As is often the case with medieval authors, we know relatively little about Dante Alighieri's personal life. In his *Convivio* (circa 1304-1307) *{The Banquet),* he tells us that he was born in Florence, Italy, and we now know that his birth probably occurred in late May or early June, 1265, in the San Martino district of that city. We know that his father, Alighiero di Bellincione d'Alighieri, was a notary. His mother, Donna Bella, was probably the daughter of the noble Durante degli Abati. She died before Dante was fourteen, and his father took a second wife, Lapa di Chiarissimo Cialuffi. They had a son, Francesco, and a daughter, Tana. Although the Alighieri family was noble by virtue of the titles bestowed upon it, by 1265 its social status and wealth seem to have declined. Nonetheless, when Alighiero Alighieri died around 1283, he left his children moderately well off, owners of city and country properties.

Around this time, Dante Alighieri followed through on the marriage arranged by his father in 1277 and took the gentlewoman Gemma Donati as his wife. They had two sons, Pietro and Jacopo, and at least one daughter, Antoma. (Dante and Gemma might have had a second daughter, Beatrice, although Beatrice could have been Antonia's monastery name.) Dante's marriage and family life seem to have had no impact on his poetry. He wrote nothing about his immediate family in the *Divine Comedy* (circa 1308-21), but there might be a reference to a sister in *La Vita Nuova {The New Life)* (circa 1292-1300).

As a youth, Dante might have attended Florence's Franciscan lower school and school of philosophy. Brunetto Latini (circa 1220-94), the distinguished scholar, teacher, statesman and author, encouraged him to study rhetoric at the University at Bologna. In *La Vita Nuova* Dante tells us that he taught himself to write verse. He became one of Florence's top poets, associating and exchanging work with other well-known writers like Guido Cavalcanti (circa 1240-1300), Lapo Gianni (circa 1270-1332) and Cino da Pistoia (circa 1270-1336). Dante was friendly with the musician and singer Casella (no dates) and might have known the artists Oderisi da Gubbio (circa 1240-99) and Giotto (circa 1267-1337).

In 1274, when he was nine years old, Dante tells us he met Bice Portinan, whom he later called Beatrice, "bringer of blessedness." His love for this beautiful daughter of Folco Portinari was to become one of the strongest forces in his life. When she died suddenly in 1290, Dante collected the lyric poems he had written to her, linked them with prose commentaries and produced *La Vita Nuova,* the slim volume that is really the beginning of his masterwork, the *Divine Comedy.* Linking the two is Dante's love for and idealization of Beatrice, a love which Dante transformed from the physical to the spiritual. Indeed in the *Divine Comedy,* Beatrice prepares Dante the Pilgrim for and leads him to his final face-to-face meeting with God.

Dante was also a soldier, a politician, and a diplomat. Like other families of the lesser nobility and artisan class, the Alighiens allied themselves with the Florentine political faction called the Guelfs (or Guelphs). Their opposition, the Ghibellines, represented the

feudal aristocracy. Dante saw military service as a member of the cavalry, which he joined in 1289. He fought with Florence and her Guelf allies against Arezzo, in their victory at the battle of Campaldino in 1289, and in the Guelf victory at Caprona in August of that year.

As a first step toward holding important public offices, Dante joined the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries in 1295. That same year he served on the People's Council of the Commune of Florence and as a member of the council that elected that city's Priors. In 1296 we find him on the Council of the Hundred, an influential political body involved in Florentine civic and financial matters. He traveled as ambassador to San Gimignano in 1300 and was himself elected that year to the high office of Prior. Again as ambassador, the White Guelfs (his faction) sent him to meet with the Pope at Anagni. While he was away, the Whites lost power and their rivals, the Black Guelfs, exiled Dante for two years. They charged him with conspiracy against the Pope and Florence. Dante refused to appear at his hearing in 1302 or to pay his fines, since he thought doing so would be an admission of guilt. The Blacks told him that if he ever returned to Florence he would be arrested and burned alive. There is no evidence that he ever saw his beloved Florence again.

From 1303 on, Dante traveled extensively in northern Italy and lived the rest of his days as a courtier and teacher in exile. In 1303 he stayed in Verona with Bartolomeo della Scala, and in 1304 appeared in Arezzo plotting a re-entry into Florence with other exiled Whites and Ghibellines. This failed disastrously and Dante probably moved on to Lunigiana, where he performed diplomatic services for the Malaspina family from 1305-07. Some historians think he journeyed to Paris in 1309 to study at the University, although there is little evidence to support this. From 1312-18 he lived in Verona, again with the Scala family, this time under the patronage of Can Grande della Scala, to whom he dedicated his *Paradise,* the third volume of the *Divine Comedy.* While in Verona, the Florentine government again sentenced Dante to death and this time extended the threat to include his sons. From 1318-21 Dante was in Ravenna under the protection of Guido Novella da Polenta, surrounded by eager pupils and highly praised as the author of *Convivio, Inferno* and *Purgatory.* On September 13 or 14, in 1321, Dante died in Ravenna, where he is buried.

Plot Summary

Inferno: Layout and Journey

Dante's Hell is cone-shaped and points to the center of the earth. Dante divided his Hellish cone into a hierarchy, an orderly structure that he split into two major divisions, upper and lower Hell. Three rivers circle around three levels of the cone. As they circle, the rivers Acheron, Phlegethon, and Styx flow down to the pit at the bottom of Hell. There they become part of Cocytus, the ice lake which imprisons Lucifer.

Through this region (Hell) Dante sent his alter ego, the Pilgrim, and Virgil, the Pilgrim's guide. Virgil was one of the greatest classical Latin poets. He wrote the *Aeneid,* which starts after the Trojan War and tells the story of Aeneas, the Trojan hero who founded Rome—at least according to Virgil. In general, Virgil represents Reason, a quality the Pilgrim needs to get him through the first two regions, Hell and Purgatory. When he reaches the third, Paradise, his faith largely takes over, although he is guided there, too.

Upper Hell has a vestibule (an entry way) and nine levels around and down which the Pilgrim and Virgil travel. Upper Hell's five levels correspond to five of Christianity's seven deadly sins: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, and wrath. Lower Hell holds the shades of those guilty of the other two deadly sins, envy and pride. Starting at the top, at ground level, and working downward, the divisions of upper Hell are: 1) the Vestibule, which holds the indecisive, including the angels who sided neither with God nor with Lucifer during his revolt; 2) Circle One, Limbo, where those, like Virgil and other Classical poets and philosophers, who lived before Christ's birth, are; 3) Circle Two, the lustful; 4) Circle Three, the gluttons; 5) Circle Four, the greedy and wasteful; 6) Circle Five, the wrathful Here stands the City of Dis, which separates the upper and lower regions.

Circle Six begins lower Hell and is the level on which the heretics are punished. Circle Seven punishes three groups of sinners: those who were violent against their neighbors, against themselves (the suicides), and those who were violent against art, nature, and God. The Great Barrier, a sheer drop, separates Circle Seven from the rest of lower Hell, and Dante and Virgil descend to it on the back of Geryon, a fantastical, multicolored beast with the face of a man and a scorpion's tail. Circle Eight is divided into ten concentric circles. These circles are called "evil ditches," or *malebolge,* and are crossed by seven bridges, which radiate out from the center like a spokes on a wheel. All seven bridges are broken over the sixth ditch. Into each ditch, or *bolgia*, are placed sinners: 1) panderers and seducers; 2) flatterers; 3) those guilty of simony, of selling pardons for sins; 4) sorcerers; 5) barrators, those who provoked discord or division; 6) hypocrites; 7) thieves; 8) deceivers; 9) others who provoked discord or division; 10) falsifiers.

Circle Nine, the last, holds the worst group of sinners: traitors to family, country, guests, and lords. This vast ice lake, Cocytus, is divided into four Circles: 1) Caina; after Cain, the Bible's first murderer; 2) Antenora, after Antenor, the treasonous Trojan warrior; 3)

Ptolomea, either after the biblical Ptolemy, who had his father-in-law and two sons killed; or after Ptolemy XII, the Egyptian king who invited Pompey to his kingdom and then killed him; 4) Judecca, after Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Christ. At the center of this lake stands three-headed, six-winged Lucifer, the arch-traitor, who rebelled against God and was banished from Heaven. He is frozen from the waist down. Each of his three heads chews on a legendary traitor: Judas Iscariot, Marcus Brutus, and Caius Cassius. These last two participated in the assassination of Julius Caesar and combine with Judas to create an evil perversion of the Holy Trinity.

On each level the Pilgrim and Virgil encounter die shades of sinners who have committed the sins for which they are being physically punished. The deeper into the cone the travelers descend, the more serious the sins become. As the Pilgrim sees and talks to these shades, he learns about the nature of sin and about using reason to avoid committing sins. Most importantly, he learns to hate the sin and not the sinner; he discovers the difference between feeling sorry for die sinners and pitying their plight.

In Dante's orderly system, all the sinners' punishments fit their crimes. Dante called this kind of punishment *contrappeso,* counterpoint or counterbalance. For example, in Canto 5 of the *Inferno,* the Pilgrim meets Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta. These two lovers committed adultery and were murdered by Francesca's husband. Their eternal punishment is to be blown round the fifth level by a hot wind that symbolizes passion—and they are joined together, inseparably, for all time. To show how much the Pilgrim has to learn at this point, Dante demonstrates die Pilgrim's sorrow for these sinners. The Pilgrim does not understand that Francesca lies when she claims that she and Paolo loved each another. He does not understand that it was the lust they felt, and acted on, and not love, that condemned their souls to damnation. The misguided Pilgrim is so affected that he faints after listening to Francesca's story. By the time he reaches Lucifer in Hell's pit in Canto 34, though, the Pilgrim has a fuller knowledge o the true nature of sin. Then, and only then, is he ready to follow Virgil, to climb out of Hell and up the Mountain of Purgatory.

Purgatory: Layout and Journey

When they emerge from Hell's pit, the Pilgrim and Virgil find themselves at the foot of the Mountain of Purgatory. This very steep mountain rises at a more than forty-five degree angle, and the narrow paths that circle toward its summit are dangerously unrailed. Sinners are not condemned to Purgatory forever. They are there to do penance for their sins. As in Hell, these penances fit the sins. Penance is not punishment; it is remedial and corrective. This is the primary difference between Hell and Purgatory: the shades in Purgatory have time and the desire lo learn from their sins. They know that they will someday rise to Heaven. Hell, on the other hand, is a hopeless place. At the Last Judgment it will be sealed forever, and its residents exist with no opportunity for repentance, completely without hope. This is the worst punishment possible in the Christian universe.

Dante invented the Mountain and placed it opposite Jerusalem, in what medieval mapmakers thought was the uninhabited southern hemisphere. Since these mapmakers thought this hemisphere was landless and covered with water, it makes sense that Purgatory is a mountain and an island. This region's layout is somewhat simpler than Hell's. Dante divided his Mountain into four levels: Antepurgatory, Lower, Middle, and Upper Purgatory. These last three make up Purgatory proper, and Antepurgatory is like Hell's vestibule or entryway. Atop it all sits the Garden of Eden, The four levels are further divided into circles and terraces. Antepurgatory at the bottom has two circles, and these regions have earthly landscapes. (The sun even rises and sets on the Mountain.)

Purgatory proper is made up of seven terraces, all of which are composed of nothing but bare stone. Counting the Garden of Eden at the peak, Antepurgatory's two circles and Purgatory proper's seven levels, there are ten levels in all. The most sinful inhabit the lower levels and are farthest from God.

The first and lowest level of Antepurgatory is home to two groups of sinners who have not yet begun their penance. This first group contains the excommunicated. The second group inhabits terrace two and contains three subgroups, all of whom lacked spiritual passion. They were, in a sense, spiritually indifferent. On the third terrace, just above these late repentants, is Peter's Gate, which an angel guards. The Pilgrim must pass through this gate before he moves to the seven upper terraces of Purgatory, each of which contains shades who committed one of the seven deadly sins. On these levels temporarily reside those who misused love: the proud, the envious, the wrathful, the slothful, the greedy, the gluttonous and the lustful. This order reverses that of Hell, which has the lustful at the highest level and the proud in the pit at the bottom. Therefore, the Pilgrim moves from worst sin in Hell to worst sin on the Mountain. When he reaches the peak, he meets Purgatory's least sinful souls and is closest to God.

The Pilgrim's education continues as he and Virgil wind their way around and up the Mountain to the Garden, much like the souls must do who are destined for Heaven. The Pilgrim participates in his instruction in much the same was as he does in Hell. On the Mountain he encounters various groups and individuals who sinned while alive and who interact instructively with him. From them he learns valuable lessons about, among other things, humility, love of God and misuse of reason, the power of prayer and the power of poetry. Early on an angel inscribes seven "Ps" (for the Latin for "sin," *(peccatum)* on his forehead, one for each of the deadly sins. As the Pilgrim moves upward toward innocence, one "P" per level is removed by an angel. Reason can lead him only so far, and after crowning his student lord of himself *(Purgatory* 27), Virgil vanishes from the Garden of Eden *(Purgatory* 30). This signifies that the Pilgrim has "graduated" and is ready to move to the next and highest level. He has worked his way back to a state of innocence like that lost by Adam and Eve when they lived in the Garden. From Eden, Beatrice and his faith lead the Pilgrim the rest of the way and carry him on to Paradise.

Paradise: Layout and Journey

The historical Beatrice died at a young age, in 1290, and Dante's earthly, physical love for her became intensely spiritual. In the epic work that Dante created, Beatrice's reciprocal spiritual love for the Pilgrim motivates her to lead him to God, source of all love. This she does, as the two travelers are transported heavenward. As they soar toward God, the Pilgrim is amazed to find himself moving through space and wonders if his body or just his soul has taken flight from the Garden at the the Mountain's summit.

Beatrice and the Pilgnm find themselves at the edge of another ten-level structure. This one is comprised of nine crystalline spheres, each one placed concentrically inside the other. All revolve, providing the seven "planets" set in the first seven spheres with motion. (During Dante's time, astronomers believed the moon and sun to be planets, Neptune, Uranus, and Pluto had not yet been discovered.) Moving outward from the earth, Dante's planetary spheres are those of: the moon, Mercury, Venus, the sun, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Past Saturn are the spheres of the fixed stars and of the Primum Mobile, or "Prime Mover." Medieval astronomers believed that the stars were stationary, fixed in place in the heavens. They posited that all the stars were embedded in the surface of an immobile crystal sphere which held them all in place. Beyond this eighth sphere of the fixed stars was the ninth, the Prime Mover. God sets the Prime Mover into motion, and it turns the eight spheres below and inside it. Beyond these nine spheres is the Empyrean, which is made of pure white light. This region surrounds all the spheres. It is where the Pilgrim meets God.

Each of the spheres is inhabited by a collection of saints. Like the lower regions, the heavenly spheres and their saints are arranged in a particular order. In Paradise the souls are ordered according to the states of grace they have achieved. Those on the outside rim partake of God's blessedness to a lesser degree than those in the inner circles. Nonetheless, all are happy to be in Heaven, and all partake of God's love. Moving from the outer rim of the first sphere, that of the moon, the first seven spheres and their blessed souls are: 1) the moon and the ambitious who broke vows on earth; 2) Mercury and those who loved glory on earth; 3) Venus and those who were lovers on earth; 4) the sun and the theologians; 5) Mars and those who died as martyrs and Crusaders; 6) Jupiter and the righteous rulers; 7) Saturn and the contemplatives, men like St. Benedict and St. Bernard, In the eighth sphere, that of the fixed stars, the Pilgrim has a vision of the Virgin Mary and of the light of Christ. In the ninth sphere, that of the Prime Mover, the Pilgrim has a vision of Christ. Finally, in the Empyrean the Pilgrim has avision of God.

In Paradise the Pilgnm's education proceeds in the same way it does in the lower two regions. There are two fundamental differences here, though. The souls that the Pilgrim encounters have all fulfilled their desire for God. They have nothing to strive for or to desire, nothing to do but gaze in rapture upon the light andlove of God. Unlike the concrete regions of Hell and Purgatory, Paradise's residents do not inhabit their fleshly bodies. Therefore, they appear to the Pilgrim as sparks or as light and communicate with him via signs or symbols. For example, when the theologians appear to him, they

do so in the form of a circle, the symbol of perfection. When the souls in the sphere of Mars materialize, they take the shape of a brilliant cross. As the souls in the sphere of the fixed stars return to the Empyrean, they appear like snowflakes falling upward. The poet had so much trouble explaining such phenomena that he had to invent new words to describe them. Indeed, the closer the Pilgrim gets to God, the more the poet writes that words fail him, Beatrice leads the Pilgrim through the nine spheres and leaves him with St. Bernard, who provides him with his last instructions *(Paradise* 31). Beatrice has also functioned as the Pilgrim's teacher in this region. For example, she explains that, since human capabilities are limited, Scripture describes God in human terms in order to make him comprehensible. Beatrice also introduces the Pilgrim to a variety of blessed souls, some of whom test him to see if he has made the necessary progress. St. Peter, for instance, asks the Pilgrim some rather difficult theological questions, which he answers perfectly, proving that he is becoming ready for the ultimate vision of God *(Paradise* 24).

In Canto 33 the Pilgrim has that vision, and it comes to him as a blinding flash of wisdom. In that brief moment, he experiences everything that the blessed experience in Heaven. Thus, all of his desires are momentarily fulfilled. He returns to earth, ready and anxious to write, for our benefit, the *Divine Comedy,* so that all people might have a brief glimpse of "the Love that moves the sun and other stars" which he has experienced *(Paradise* 33, l. 145).

Characters

Beatrice

Beatrice summons Virgil from Limbo *{Inferno* 2) to lead Dante the Pilgrim through Hell, up the Mount of Purgatory to the Garden of Eden. She sits with the blessed in the heavenly rose, where she waits to replace Virgil as the Pilgrim's guide *(Purgatory* 30). Beatrice, "bringer of blessedness," is therefore largely responsible for the Pilgrim's (and the poet's) salvation. The historical Beatrice Portinari (1266-90) was the daughter of Folco Portinari, a wealthy Florentine, and the wife of Simone dei Bardi.In his *Vita Nuova (NewLife),* Dante claims to have met and fallen in love with her when they were about nine years old. The *Vita Nuova* consists of love poems Dante wrote to Beatrice, which he connected with prose commentaries. The physical love he had for her, which is the subject of the *Vita Nuova,* was transformed into the spiritual love that enabled his salvation, which is the subject of the *Divine Comedy.*

Bice

See Beatrice

The Pilgrim

The Pilgrim is Dante the poet's alter ego, a kind of "Everyman" (someone whom everyone can relate to) whose travels the reader follows, experiencing the three regions while he does. Ideally, as the Pilgrim learns from his encounters with countless shades, the reader attains, along with him, a degree of enlightenment. Virgil, author of *The Aeneid,* traditionally seen as the voice of Reason, leads the Pilgrim through Hell and Purgatory, where the Pilgrim learns about the nature of sin in all its guises. Through Virgil's instruction, which is sometimes imperfect, the Pilgrim learns, most importantly, not to pity sinners but to have compassion for them, not to hate the sinner but the sin. Virgil takes the Pilgrim to the Garden of Eden at the top of the Mountain of Purgatory, where Matelda becomes their guide *(Purgatory* 28). She leads them through the Garden and gives way to Beatrice *(Purgatory* 30), who takes the Pilgrim the rest of the way through Purgatory and up into Heaven. There St. Bernard *(Paradise* 31) replaces her and guides the Pilgrim until he is able to travel on his own.

Dante the poet and Dante the Pilgrim are not the same, at least not until the final few lines of the poem. Dante the poet tells us that he actually made this journey to God and was told to return to earth and write what he saw. Like his Pilgrim, the poet was naive and unschooled when he entered hell's mouth. He returns to his earthly life a wiser person, secure in the knowledge that there is a place reserved for him in Heaven (which he will occupy after spending time in Purgatory for being prideful). Only after the Pilgrim makes the journey and attains the poet's wisdom through experience, only after he meets God face to face in *Paradise,* do the poet and Pilgrim merge. There, for a brief

moment, the poem's past tense shifts to the present, to Dante's Florence, where the two become one, as the poet writes the Pilgrim's vision of God and his recounting that vision.

Ulysses

Ulysses is the crafty hero of Homer's epic Greek poem, the *Odyssey.* Ulysses is the son of Laertes, King of Ithaca, and father of Telemachus. Homer's poem tells the tale of his wandering for twenty years after the Trojan War and of his return to Ithaca. Dante created the events he tells about Ulysses and his crew and places him in hell with his Greek warrior companion, Diomede *(Inferno* 26). There he has the proud Ulysses tell of how he disobeyed Hercules' instructions and convinced his men to sail beyond the Pillars of Hercules and the bounds of the known world. He explains how they sailed into the southern hemisphere, where they saw Dante's Mount of Purgatory just before their ship was pulled beneath the waves where they all perished. Dante uses the story as a contrast to his own, which was divinely sanctioned.

Virgil

Publius Vergilius Maro (70-19 B.C.) was one of the greatest Roman poets and is Dante the Pilgrim's guide through Hell and most of Purgatory, Virgil's *Aeneid,* tells the story of Aeneas's founding of Rome after the Trojan War and was a major inspiration for Dante's *Divine Comedy.* In the famous Book 6 of the *Aeneid,* the pagan Aeneas travels to the underworld, where he sees the wicked suffering and the virtuous living a life of comfort and ease. This episode provided Dante, along with other literary accounts of underworld journeys, with the basic structure for his vision of the Christian Hell. During the Middle Ages, Virgil had a reputation as a magician and wizard. St. Augustine, the Emperor Constantine, and others thought Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* prophesied Christ's birth. Dante the Pilgrim and Virgil encounter the Roman poet Statius (45-96) on the Mountain of Purgatory *(Purgatory* 21), where Statius claims that Virgil's *Fourth Eclogue* was responsible for his conversion to Christianity.

Virgil's *Aeneid* was the basic Latin textbook in medieval schools. Students learned grammar, rhetoric and the language by translating Virgil's Latin. Dante would have been no exception. Since Latin was the language of the literate in the Middle Ages and since most people learned it from Virgil, his *Aeneid* was one of the most well-known books. It is still used in many Latin courses today.

Themes

Education and Salvation

Learning how to attain salvation is the main theme of Dante's epic and subsumes all its other themes. The *Divine Comedy* is, therefore, a tale of the Pilgrim's education and, by association, the reader's. The reader follows Dante's Pilgrim through Hell in *Inferno* and learns with him about sin's pervasiveness. The torments of the sinners, who exist forever without hope of redemption or of an end to their suffering, graphically illustrate sin's consequences. As the reader and Pilgrim move through the underworld, the shades they see and speak with provide physical examples of and exemplary lessons on the seven deadly sins. At the end of *Inferno,* the Pilgrim and reader are better able to recognize sin in its various forms and to avoid committing it. Salvation and further spiritual education are impossible without such knowledge.

In the second section, *Purgatory,* the Pilgrim and the pilgrim reader move up the Mountain of Purgatory to the Garden of Eden at its peak. Along the way they learn the value of contrition and repentance, of having to suffer for causing suffering and for disobeying God. They learn this again by seeing and interacting with shades who represent the Seven Deadly Sins but who here exemplify the desire for contrition and repentance.

The learning process concludes in the third section, *Paradise,* where a plethora of saved souls appear to the Pilgrim and explain the workings of grace and God's love to him. In this celestial region, the Pilgrim takes a series of what we might call oral exams which test his growing knowledge. Schooled by his experiences in the three regions, having gained a firm understanding of sin and grace, the Pilgrim passes his exams and graduates to the vision of God. He, then, becomes a teacher, because he returns to earth with instructions to write about his experiences for the benefit of others.

Choices and Consequences: Providence and Free Witt

Inextricably linked to the theme of education and to the soul's salvation is the theme of free will and its relation to God's Providence. Following the writings of Boethius and Thomas Aquinas, which permeate the *Divine Comedy,* Dante shows his Pilgrim and reader that God's Providence, his vision, encompasses all events and all of time. Since God knows and sees all simultaneously, he knows exactly what we will do and when we will do it. Dante's great-great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, explains to the Pilgrim in *Paradise* that this does not mean that our actions are predestined, only that God has full knowledge of them. We can and do choose how to act, how to employ our free will, and we must accept responsibility for those choices. As he does in the scene with Cacciaguida, over the course of the poem the Pilgrim comes to understand that his actions have consequences and that he bears ultimate responsibility for those

consequences. This is of the utmost importance, for failing to understand this can damn one for eternity, as it has those in Hell.

Art and Experience: The Power of Literature

Closely tied to the themes of education and the correct use of free will is that of literature's power to influence its readers' actions. Dante made the revolutionary decision to write his poem in Italian and not Latin—the language of epic, of the Church and of lofty themes—so that it would reach a wider audience. Among other things, he meant his *Divine Comedy* to be an example, to focus the reader on the next life and, if necessary, to change the way he or she was living this life. Some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that Dante expected his poem to be read with the same seriousness as Scripture.

Dante himself was profoundly influenced, poetically and spiritually, by sacred and secular texts from his own time and from the ancient past. Perhaps most telling for this theme was the impact Augustine's *Confessions* had on him. In Book 8 of that important work, Augustine (354-430) writes about the power of literature to convert and uses himself as a moving example. He tells of sitting in a garden during a time of intense emotional and spiritual turmoil. In his moment of greatest anxiety, he heard a voice telling him to open the book he had with him to a random place and to read. Doing so, he finds St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, the story of his conversion to Christianity (13.13). Paul's tale has such a profound effect upon Augustine that he puts down the book, reading no further. Immediately, his suffering is relieved and he converts to Christianity.

Dante used this episode from the *Confessions* to make a point about the power of literature and the need for correct reading. In *Inferno* (5), Dante has Francesca tell of the effect reading had on her and Paolo, her lover. They were not reading Scripture like Augustine, but a medieval romance, *Lancelot.* Francesca says that she and Paolo reached the place where the lovers in the tale kiss. Then, echoing Augustine, she says they read no further, implying that they consummated their adulterous relationship and that *Lancelot* inspired the act The difference between these two reading episodes is clear: both readers were affected by the power of the tales they were reading, but Augustine read Paul's account correctly and took up the faith. Francesca and Paolo allowed the medieval romance to negatively affect their actions. For "misusing" the text and their free will, they must spend eternity in Hell.

The other major example of this theme, and one that counterbalances the Francesca episode, is the meeting between the Pilgrim, Virgil (70-19 B.C.), and Statius (61-96 A.D.), the poet in *Purgatory* 22. Ecstatic at meeting Virgil, the great pagan poet, Statius tells him that his *Fourth Eclogue,* a poem that the Middle Ages read as prophesying the coming of Christ, inspired him to convert to Christianity. Unlikely as this might seem, Dante uses it as another example of the power of literature and the need for right reading, for correctly employing free will in the service of salvation.

Order and Disorder

Dante's age was a chaotic one, and his poem, particularly *Inferno,* takes the fourteenth century's sacred and secular strife as a dominant theme. He rails against corrupt popes and clergy and lashes out at politicians, assigning many of them permanent places in Hell. Nonetheless, we must understand that Dante did not hate the institutions of Church or State. As a political and religious conservative, he saw such institutions as vital to maintaining social and spiritual order. Indeed, Dante hoped for a reduction of papal political involvement and that an omnipotent Christian emperor would arise and restore order to his chaotic world. He had great faith in Emperor Henry VITs ability to do so. Unfortunately, Henry was never able to overcome his political opposition nor to maintain papal support, and his unifying efforts failed.

A supporter of institutions in the abstract, Dante was angry with those individuals he thought abused their offices or who were corrupt in other ways. For example, he placed Pope Nicholas III (d. 1280) in Hell, angrily stuffing him upside-down in a hole, where tongues of fire eternally "baptize" the soles of his feet *(Inferno* 19). He then goes a step further and prophesies that Boniface VIII (1217-1303) and Clement V (d. 1314) will join Nicholas in his hellhole, where they too will pay for perverting the papacy. Politicians fare no better, particularly the Ghibellines, members of the political party that exiled Dante from Florence. For instance, the Pilgrim finds the Ghibelline leader, Farinata degli Uberti, entombed with other heretics in Hell *(Inferno* 10). Dante was not above condemning members of his own party, the Guelfs, to Hell either, as we see in the circle of violence. There Guido Guerra and Tegghiaio Aldobrandi run after the green flag with the other naked sodomites.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is itself representative of the need he felt for the comfort that comes from order and stability. It is almost as if Dante, through the order he built into his poem, was trying to counteract the disorder he saw all round him. As the last great hierarchical epic of the Middle Ages, this intensely ordered poem attempts to synthesize and summarize the histories of pagan and Christian thought and to weave those systems into a cohesive whole. The sheer complexity of this whole, however, almost works against its author's need for order and desire for comfort by illustrating just how difficult—if not impossible—constructing and maintaining such a complex system can be.

Style

Not all epics conform to one definition; however, they share enough of the same poetic characteristics so that we can group them under the genre label of epic. Traditionally epics deal with grandly important themes, often begin "in the middle of things," *in medias res,* take place over an extended period of time and a large area, have a large cast and involve heroic, often legendary, characters. In keeping with their serious subject matter, epics often involve the gods or God in some way. They are narrative in form; in other words, they tell a story. Epics are written in verse of a high register; that is, then-authors use formal language and poetic devices like symbolism, metaphor and simile, which is a kind of metaphor or figurative language. Dante's *Divine Comedy* utilizes all of these characteristics.

Dante's epic tells the story of the Pilgrim's journey from sin to grace. For medieval Christians there was no loftier theme about which to write than the soul's salvation. As the poem opens, Dante the Pilgrim, the poet's alter ego, finds himself lost in sin, wandering "in the middle of the road of our life" *{Inferno* 1,1.1). The Pilgrim is at the midpoint along the road of his life, a familiar metaphor. The plural pronoun "our" pulls the reader into the action and includes him or her as virtual pilgrims on this journey to God. Thus, the Pilgrim stands for all Christians, who may read and learn, as he learns, the nature of sin and how to overcome it.

Along with this lofty theme and beginning in the middle of things, the *Divine Comedy* takes place over a number of days and an infinitely large area. The narrative action stretches from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. The setting encompasses nothing less than the entire universe, and includes places like the Mountain of Purgatory that Dante invented specifically for the poem. Dante's Pilgrim travels with his guide, the classical epic poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.), through the depths of Hell, up the Mountain of Purgatory and through the heavenly spheres to meet God face to face.

The theme and scope of this epic are matched by its huge cast of characters, many of them legendary, even mythological. There are over five hundred characters in *Divine Comedy,* each of them somehow instrumental in the Pilgrim's theological instruction. There are countless Italian contemporaries of Dante the poet, pagan and Christian heroes and martyrs, kings, queens, emperors, empresses, devils, angels, saints, philosophers, theologians, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Christ and God the Father himself. There are also a number of poets, past and present. The most important, of course, is Virgil. What more important guide could an epic poet have than Publius Virgilius Maro, whose name—along with that of Homer—is virtually synonymous with the title of epic poet? Virgil's *Aeneid,* the tale of Aeneas' wanderings after the Trojan War, remains one of the great epics of all times. Book 6 of the *Aeneid,* in which the hero, who is predestined to found Rome, travels to the underworld was especially inspirational to Dante.

The *Divine Comedy*—like the *Aeneid* and Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—devotes a good deal of time to supernatural beings. Being a Christian epic, of course, Dante's divinities

are saints, angels and the Trinity. All of these divine characters intervene in some way to speed the Pilgrim along on his trip to the Empyrean, that space of pure white light where God dwells. The Virgin Mary notifies St. Lucy that Dante is in spiritual trouble. St. Lucy, in turn, notifies the blessed Beatrice, who sends Virgil to guide her Pilgrim, the man who loved her on earth, through Hell and Purgatory.

Dante chose to tell this massive tale of his Pilgrim's trip through the three regions in verse, following the epic form. However, he did not write it in Latin, then the language of the Church and of most serious religious poetry. Dante wrote in the vernacular, in the Tuscan dialect of his people. He did so because he wanted his message to be available to a wider audience, to include more than just those who could read Latin. Even though he wrote in die common tongue, his diction, the type of speech he used, is of the highest register, which perfectly suited his purposes.

Flexible and expressive though it was (and is), Dante's Tuscan dialect was not completely up to the task. This is no criticism of the language, for it is doubtful whether Latin or any other language would have suited him any better. The problem was that many of the things Dante needed and wanted to represent were just too otherworldly. Put another way, he had trouble describing God and parts of his Creation. Dante invented words, most famously the nearly untranslatable *trasumanar,* and had to resort to metaphor, to figurative language, consistently as he tried to replicate Creation. The section in which *trasumanar* occurs stands as a good example of the poet's acknowledging his impossible task: "The passing beyond humanity *[trasumanar]* may not be set forth in words" *(Paradise* 1,1. 70). The closer his Pilgrim gets to God and the more he transcends (his) humanity, the more frequently Dante confesses that language fails him. Indeed, on a truly profound level, the entire poem is a metaphor, a figure for a journey that perhaps never happened but that seemingly had to have happened for Dante to write about it for his readers.

Historical Context

Papacy and Empire: The Decline

Dante Alighieri was born into one of the most chaotic periods of Western European history. His birth in 1265 and death in 1321 meant that he witnessed the decline of the two most powerful social institutions of the Middle Ages, the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy. This degeneration—this loss of power, control and respect-affected Dante emotionally, psychologically and politically. The conflicts between Church and State constitute a major thread in Dante's *Divine Comedy* and are the subject of his Latin treatise *De Monarchia (On Monarchy).* This work is his plea for a universal monarchy, one that would co-exist peacefully with a pope who would hold spiritual sovereignty over the same subjects.

The process of decline began well before Dante's birth and continued long after his death. By the thirteenth century, the papacy's interests had grown ever more political and less and less spiritual. As C. Warren HolHster writes, it was at this time that the papacy "[lost] its hold on the heart of Europe" *(Medieval Europe: A Short History,* p. 206). By moving into national and imperial power politics and business, it created and widened the gulf between its increasingly secular agenda and the increasing spiritual needs of its members. Not only had the Church lost the respect of its flock, it found itself constantly at odds with purely secular authorities. Kings of Western and Northern European countries were centralizing their power during the thirteenth century and felt threatened by the presence in their midst of this independent, very powerful institution. These monarchs found themselves in constant conflict with this massively influential power, an institution controlled from Rome and therefore less easy to control on a local level, for the hearts, minds and coffers of its subjects.

This was particularly true of the kings of England and France. After Boniface VIII passed the bull *Unam Sanctum* in 1302, declaring that all Christians concerned with the salvation of their souls owed allegiance to the papal monarchy, things decidedly took a turn for the worse. The king of France, Philip the Fair, captured Boniface at his palace in Anagni and tried to spirit him off to France for trial (Hollister 208). Philip's spiritual coup failed, but Boniface died in shame soon after. After Boniface's death, the body of cardinals elected the politically subservient Frenchman Clement V pope. Clement's moving the papacy from Rome to Avignon in 1309 instituted the so-called Babylonian Exile or Captivity, which lasted until 1377 and meant the end of the strong medieval papacy.

The secular empire fared no better. Moving back three decades or so before Dante's birth to the reign of the Sicilian-born Emperor Frederick II, it seems that chaos was the norm in the secular realm, too. Pope Innocent HI was Frederick's mentor and supported his bid for the throne, thus demonstrating one significant instance of papal involvement in secular politics. Frederick's desire to unify a fractious Italy and to make it the imperial center earned him the hatred of the papacy, caused him to lose a good portion of his

German holdings and set much of Italy against him in rebellion. His enterprises made particular enemies of Gregory IX and Innocent IV. These popes built political alliances and used all their powers and sanctions to thwart Frederick's plans, until 1245 when Innocent and a universal Church council excommunicated this enemy of the papacy, this "Antichrist." Frederick, deposed, died in 1250 and was not succeeded until 1273. In that year, Rudolph the Hapsburg was crowned Emperor after a nineteen-year interregnum that further weakened the already unsteady imperial monarchy. Like Frederick in Italy, Rudolph wanted to extend and solidify his holdings, and, like his predecessor, aroused nothing but princely discontent. This discontent and the events leading up to it meant the start of 600 years of German instability (Hollister, p. 205). Henry of Luxembourg followed as Emperor in 1308, submitted to papal authority and pledged to restore peace, beginning with Italy. Dante had high hopes for Henry's monarchy, hopes which were never fulfilled. By this time Dante had grown more and more critical of Florentine politics and of the papacy, and went so far as to urge Henry to attack Florence in 1311, when he was in Italy for his coronation. The Emperor marched on Florence, but his efforts failed and meant "the end of Dante's hopes for the reestablishment of effective imperial power in Italy in the foreseeable future" (Chiarenza, *The Divine Comedy: Tracing God's Art,* p. 3).

Florence: Civic Strife

Before and during Dante's time, Italy was, as Charles T. Davis writes, "a peninsula united by language and history but not by any central government." Indeed, "Italy remained, after the failure of Frederick II' s attempt to conquer her, in her habitual state of political chaos" *(Dante's Italy and Other Essays,* p. 1). Dante was intensely displeased with the state of Florentine politics. Although the Florentine city-state was one of the most prosperous of its day, and although it flourished artistically, intellectually and commercially, it had long been the site of intermittent civil war, gang violence and family feuds which took on regional and even international dimensions. This highly accomplished place was, then, something of an paradox: a thriving commercial and artistic center and yet a very dangerous place to be. This paradox produced Dante's love hate relationship with his native city. It did not help that he thought of Florence as the "most beautiful and famous daughter of Rome," as he referred to it in *De Vulgari Eioquentia {On the Vulgar Tongue).* We have already seen what state Rome and her Empire were in at this time.

Much of the internal strife in Florence was caused by the Guelf and the Ghibelline parties, Italianized forms for the German *Welf* and *Weiblingen.* These groups had a long-standing adversarial relationship in Germany, dating to the twelfth century. Guelfs were traditionally associated with papal power and the French monarchy and the Ghibellines with Imperial power, although the situation is far more complex than that. They were introduced into Florentine politics following a quarrel arising out of the murder of Buondelmonte de' Buondelmonti by members of the Amidei family on Easter Sunday, 1215. The Buondelmonti family headed the Guelf faction and the Uberti the Ghibelline one. After the murder, the Guelfs reached out to the papacy for support, the Ghibellines to the Empire, and Florence became bitterly divided. Their struggles lasted

in earnest (although did not really end) for sixty-three years, until 1278, and control of Florence shifted back and forth, from Guelf to Ghibelline hands. In 1266, one year after Dante's death, the Guelfs regained control of Florence and began nearly 30 years of peace and prosperity. They prevailed but in 1300 split themselves into factions, the White Guelfs and the Black Guelfs. The Whites were led by the rich and powerful Cerchi, a family of prosperous merchants who eventually associated themselves with the Ghibellines. The Blacks were led by the Donati, a family with banking interests all over Europe.

Dante was intimately involved in this conflict, and although he was born into a Guelf family, he came to side with the Whites and the Ghibellines in opposition to a papal monarchy and to Charles of Valois. Dante saw military service as a member of the cavalry, which he joined in 1289. He fought with Florence and her Guelf allies against Arezzo, in their victory at the battle of Campaldino in 1289, and in the Guelf victory at Caprona in August of that year. In 1295 he served on the People's Council of the Commune of Florence and as a member of the council that elected that city's Priors. In 1296 he was on the Council of the Hundred, an influential political body involved in Florentine civic and financial matters. He traveled as ambassador to San Gimignano in 1300 and was elected that year to the high office of Prior. Again as ambassador, he was sent by the Whites to meet with Pope Boniface at Anagni. While he was away, the Whites lost power and the Blacks exiled Dante for two years. They charged him with conspiracy against the Pope and Florence. Dante refused to appear at his hearing in 1302 or to pay his fines, since he thought doing so would be an admission of guilt. The Blacks told him that if he ever returned to Florence he would be arrested and burned alive. There is no evidence that he ever did return there.

Critical Overview

Dante's poem, and particularly its allegorical qualities, provoked commentary almost from the moment of its completion. Indeed, Dante himself was perhaps its first critic. In a letter he wrote to his patron, Can Grande della Scala, the man to whom he dedicated the *Paradise ,* Dante suggested that his poem should be read on four levels. The first level is the literal one. On this level, the poem is about a physical journey toward God taken by the poet himself. The other three levels are allegorical, abstractly symbolic, and very complex. From the beginning of its public life, commentators have extracted and studied these abstract allegorical meanings of Dante's epic, to dig deeper meanings out of its literal level just as they did with Holy Scripture. As Ricardo Quinones notes in *Dante Alighieri,* 1979, there were twelve commentaries written on the *Divine Comedy* from Dante's death in 1321 to 1400. Dante, a political exile, was praised in the year of his death by his fellow Florentine, Giovanni Villani, who included a biography and praises of Dante in his chronicle of Florence. Dante's sons Jacopo and Pietro were the first to write commentaries on the *Divine Comedy,* and their work, like that of other early commentators', is vital to our understanding of the socio-cultural references that pervade the work. (Many of these commentaries are now online and accessible through the Dartmouth Dante Project.)

The Florentine poet Boccaccio (1313-75) was the first real keeper of the flame, though. He wrote the first life of Dante and gave the first university lectures on the *Divine Comedy* in Florence during the academic year 1373-74. His correspondence with the poet Francesco Petrarch (1304-74) is particularly revealing, because it provides us with a glimpse of the beginnings of a poetical rivalry with Dante that was to continue for years and because the correspondences reveal that Petrarch felt rather envious of his'contemporary's popularity. It was not until 1481, though, mat Dante's name was fully restored in his native Florence. That year the city produced a major edition of Dante's poem in which Cristoforo Landino referred to him as "divino poeta," the divine poet. This adjective, as Quinones reports, was used in the 1555 Venetian edition of the work and applied to the title. From then on, the poem that Dante called his *Commedia* became known as his *La Divina Commedia,* the *Divine Comedy.*

Nonetheless, as Werner Friederich in *Dante's Fame Abroad ,* 1950, points out, such veneration was not sustained in Western Europe through the nineteenth century. Although Dante has been a major force of inspiration in English letters since Geoffrey Chaucer (circa 1345-1400), in countries where the Enlightenment took stronger hold, like France, his reception was less favorable. The predominance of rational thought there and a reliance on grammatical and rhetorical studies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries meant that Dante's poem fell from favor. German readers and critics valued him more during this time for his antipapal stance than as a poet, and in Spain after the fifteenth century, Friederich writes that he was "completely neglected." Dante does not seem to have made much of an impact in the United States during this time, although Thomas Jefferson was interested in his poetry. There was also the occasional article on Dante in American magazines. Interest in the United States really did not begin in earnest, though, until the nineteenth century with writers such as Ralph

Waldo Emerson (1803-82) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82). The latter's magnificent translation of the *Divine Comedy,* published in 1867, is still read today.

In the nineteenth century, with the rise of Romanticism, things changed rather dramatically for Dante's epic. The literary-critical focus shifted from grammar and rhetoric to dramatic, historical and national concerns. Romantic critics tended to focus on the poem's drama, on the way Dante characterized the inhabitants of the three regions, and to ignore the poem's allegorical and theological aspects. Dante's *Inferno* was the inspiration for a number of compassionate character studies. Francesco DeSanctis' famous essay on Francesca da Rimini, whom Dante placed in hell for adultery *(Inferno* 5), is a classic of the genre. For critics like DeSanctis, the value in the poem—particularly *Inferno*—derives from the pleasure the reader gets from its dramatic characterizations. This led to critical sympathizing with figures like Francesca and the belief that Dante, too, must have felt this way. Although not surprising, given the Romantics' emphasis on feeling and emotion in their own poetry, such readings of this medieval text are misguided. Using Francesca as an example, we can see that critics like DeSanctis were seduced by her poetic monologue, just as Dante's Pilgrim is. The latter faints out of sympathy with Francesca's plight because he misreads her lust for the adulterous Paolo as love.

In the early twentieth century, Benedetto Croce reacted to such Romantic readings by separating the poem's structure from its theology. Nonetheless, as Marguerite Mills Chiarenza says in *The Divine Comedy: Tracing God's Art,* 1989, Croce found Dante at his best when he was intuitive. This meant rather ironically that Croce legitimized the Romantics' focus on compassion and drama. After all, Croce argued, allegory is artificial and doctrinal— anything but intuitive—and a work that relies upon such artifice is not poetry. Although such assertions meant that Croce's theories were hard for many to accept, he did influence a large following.

Since Croce, two American Dante scholars greatly impacted readers in this country: Charles Singleton and John Freccero. Singleton's facing-page edition of the poem is the standard edition for American critics and offers a wealth of scholarship and interpretation. Singleton argued for what we might call an organic or holistic reading of *The Divine Comedy,* and Freccero has gone even farther in this direction. According to this way of thinking, we cannot separate allegory from politics, poetic structure from theology and philosophy. We must read the poem as an allegory of creation, as Dante's attempt to mimic God's work in verse. Hence, Singleton and Freccero see and promote the importance of St. Augustine's (354-430) thought in understanding Dante's world and work. The saint's autobiographical *Confessions* stands as one of Dante's conversion models? For Freccero, seeing how Augustine turned his own conversion to Christianity and journey to God into literature, and recognizing that journey's impact on Dante, takes readers a long way toward a deeper understanding of Dante'spoem. Like Singleton, Freccero sees the poem as knowable. He thinks of it as an organic whole that readers can understand fully if they work at it.

Singleton, and Freccero after him, have revolutionized Dante studies, particularly in the United States. Their work and totalizing vision have legions of followers.

A growing number of younger scholars, like Teolinda Barolini and John Kleiner, are more skeptical of the poem's perfection. They point out what they see as cracks in its structural and allegorical armor and have produced insightful new readings of it. It seems likely that seven hundred years of study and commentary have not yet exhausted all the possible approaches to the poem.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Terkla traces the Pilgrim's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, focusing on one primary image in each of the poem's main sections to demonstrate that the Pilgrim attains wisdom (and that the reader may also do so).

Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a poetical paradox, a brilliant failure. How can one of the great works of Western literature—one of the most innovative, profound and, in many ways, unsurpassed poems of the Middle Ages—be a failure? Put simply, neither Dante nor any poet before or after him was capable of accomplishing this impossible task to use the imperfect medium of language to represent convincingly and accurately his journey to Paradise and, even more problematic, to write God, to represent the unrepresentable. Dante himself was aware of the impossibility of his undertaking, of course, and this drove him even harder, pushed him to lead his reader to that final, stunning vision of God. Most astonishingly, he very nearly succeeded.

As the Pilgrim travels toward God, the poet's task becomes increasingly difficult. The closer Dante moved his Pilgrim to his goal, the more regularly his language failed him, until he had to admit that his descriptive "wings were not sufficient for that," that his "power failed lofty phantasy" *(Paradise* 33,11.139,142). In order to leave his reader with the essence of the moment when his "mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish [to know the mind of God] came to it" *(Paradise* 33,11. 141-42), Dante had to rely upon metaphor. This kind of figurative language is perhaps the most potent tool for image-making and asserts that A=B, that, for example, poem=journey. We know that Dante's poem is not a literal journey, but it is a figurative one, a metaphorical one. Seeing it in this way allows the reader to cross from A and B, to consider for him- or herself how and why this poetic pilgrimage is relevant to the road of life we all travel.

Dante's poem is fundamentally didactic, that is, instructive. In order to accommodate our low-level understanding of the poem's theological, philosophical and historical components, it guides its armchair pilgrims carefully through a plethora of unfamiliar images and mystical paradoxes. Dante managed this by constructing his world's three spaces in a logical order that is still unprecedented. As the Pilgrim experiences Hell, Purgatory and Heaven, he really re-experiences events Dante the poet claims to have had in this life. Thus, the reader follows the Pilgrim through spaces that present the poet's memories. As Frances A. Yates writes in his classic study, *The Art of Memory,* If one thinks of the poem as based on the orders of places in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, and as a cosmic order of places in which spheres of Hell are the spheres of Heaven in reverse, it begins to appear as a summa [a full collection] of similitudes and exempla, ranged in order and set out upon the universe (p 95) Taken together, then, Dante's remembrances, presented as striking poetic images, produce the world of the *Divine Comedy* and thus reproduce his supposed journey to Heaven.

The Pilgrim receives these images via his sight, which functions on three levels, the ocular or physical, the spiritual, and the intellectual. These levels derive from the writings of St. Augustine (354-430), which were a major influence on Dante's thought,

and which correspond to stages of understanding and to *cantiche,* or what we might call books, of the *Divine Comedy:* ocular in *Inferno,* spiritual in *Purgatory* and intellectual in *Paradise.* The lowest level, the ocular, includes sensual experiences of things terrestrial and celestial. It therefore corresponds to the physical nature of *Inferno* and its closing view of "the beautiful things that heaven bears" (34,11,137-38). Level two, spiritual vision, *sad Purgatory* mesh in the same way. In this second canticle, the Pilgrim's spiritual vision makes possible the encounters with the angels and the dreams he has Finally, the Pilgrim's visions of the Earthly Paradise, Christ, and God in *Paradise* conform to Augustine's description of the third and highest level of vision, the intellectual.

The Pilgrim and reader take in images, store them in their memories, convert them to knowledge—to what Hugh of St.-Victor called "history"—and graduate to the next level of understanding. As the Pilgrim (and the reader following him) progresses from one spherical realm to the next, Dante's fictional faculty materialize, quiz and instruct him about what he has learned. Along with this instruction, Dante's umque metaphors accommodate the Pilgrim's and reader's weak understanding by converting difficult concepts into visual images that they can more easily decipher and more easily store in memory for later retrieval. These images accumulate as knowledge of sin and salvation, which Pilgrim and reader process into divine wisdom, all of which prepare them for the final vision of God in Paradise.

After graduating from each training level, the Pilgrim is ready to see with his mind, to link to the mind of God in the most profound way possible. The fact that the reader and the Pilgrim achieve one of these levels of vision in each of the three books, suggests that Dante saw them as plottable points upon an ascending scale that moves from potential damnation to certain illumination. The following three sections use this upward itinerary to demonstrate in small how wisdom is attained by focusing on one vibrant image from each canticle.

There are a number of places in the poem where one could begin to chart this progression, but the appearance of Geryon in *Inferno* 16 is the first instance of the truly outlandish. As such, it works nicely as an example of a visual image processed by the lowest level of vision, which is then firmly imprinted on the reader's memory. In this section, the Pilgrim and Virgil find themselves at the rim of the Great Barrier and in need of a way down to lower hell, the last of the three infernal regions, where sinners are punished for ever more serious levels of fraud. The travelers stand at "the verge" *(Inferno* 17, 1. 32) that separates these regions. Virgil, the Pilgrim's guide and teacher, tosses his student's belt over the edge, causing the Pilgrim to wonder: "'Surely'..., 'something strange will answer this signal that my master follows so with his eye'" *(Inferno* 17, 11. 115-16). True to form, the strangest vehicle in the *Divine Comedy* swims into view, Geryon.

This bizarre image of fraud is a patchwork of man and painted serpent: "His face was the face of a man, so complaisant was its outward appearance, and all of the rest of his trunk serpentine; he had two paws which were hairy to Ms armpits; his back and chest and both sides were painted with knots and small wheels" *(Inferno* 17,11. 10-15). Faced

with this incredible apparition, the poet asks the reader to trust him, to trust this metaphorical voyage and all it represents. What better infernal example, with perhaps the exception of Lucifer, is there of Augustine's first level of vision? This is, after all, the creature on whose back the poet swears he flies down to Hell's depths: "I cannot be silent; and by the notes of this *Comedy,* reader, I swear to you, so that they may not fail of lasting favor" *(Inferno* 16, II. 127-29). There was no need for "I swear to you," unless Dante knew or expected his reader to doubt his word—or unless he wanted to impress this image upon the reader's memory. Dante knew that the strangeness of this creature would be surpassed by the vision of Lucifer frozen in the pit of hell—not engulfed in flames as we might expect— and sets us up for it by challenging us with Geryon.

Dante's Lucifer is not just a perverted version of God; he is not the Trinity, not love, not hope, not chanty, neither light nor any longer the bringer of light, not order, not calm, not peace, not harmony. The list of negative descriptors is as infinite as God is positively indescribable. Given these considerations and Lucifer's heavy corporeality, we can say with Francis X. Newman that, "The confrontation with Satan is the ultimate exercise of the [corporeal vision] since Satan is the ultimate center of corporeality" ("St. Augustine's Three Visions and the Sturcture of the *Comedy," Modern Language Notes,* [1967]: 65). If we have little faith in the poet, what will we make of his final vision, of that moment when Dante writes God? Incredulous though we might be at this point, Dante schools us from his unique perspective and pulls us along with his Pilgrim, as he climbs to Heaven.

As his Pilgrim comes upon Lucifer, Dante again challenges his reader: "How frozen and faint I then became, ask not, reader, for I do not write it, because all words would fail. I was not dead nor did I remain alive: now think for yourself, if you have any wit, what I became, deprived of both the one and the other" *(Inferno* 34,11. 22-27). This address to the reader is more intense, more insistent, than the one above. Here is no mere oddity like Geryon: this is the one and only Satan, "Belzebu" *(Inferno* 34,1. 127), cause of all the world's troubles. The address to the reader insures that close attention is paid to this dramatic manifestation of the ultimate corporeal vision. The sight of Satan is so horrific that the poet cannot explain his feelings. Language fails him and Dante tells the reader to "think for yourself; make this image and moment yours; feel something of what I felt at the moment. Here the reader and the Pilgrim have experienced the worst of the corporeal universe; here poet, Pilgrim and reader momentarily merge in experience. After this profound encounter, we are ready to move with the Pilgrim to Augustine's second level of understanding, that of spiritual vision.

Purgatory 17, halfway through the *Divine Comedy,* is an excellent location from which to view this process of growth, change and education. In this section Virgil lectures on the crucial doctrine of love as driving force. This is also the point in the poem where the Pilgrim figuratively comes out of his fog to see the sun, a moment that foreshadows the poem's final vision. This is such a monumental occurrence that Dante again challenges his reader to confront a startling image and to participate in his Pilgrim's spiritual education:

Recall, reader, if ever in the mountains a mist has caught you, through which you could not see except as moles do through the skin, how, when the moist dense vapors begin to dissipate, the sphere of the sun enters feebly through them, and your imagination will quickly come to see how, at first, 1 saw the sun again, which was now setting So, matching mine to the trusty steps of my master, I came forth from such a fog to the rays which were already dead on the low shores *(Purgatory* 17,11.1-9)

Dante expects the reader to match both imaginative power and figurative steps with his Pilgrim, to follow spiritually and "physically" as he ascends. Here he compares the Pilgrim's mental state to that of a man in an alpine fog, a state in which imagination cannot function because the fog of physicality and faulty vision block the light of God. A glimpse of the sun, of loving enlightenment, is necessary to drive away the confusion before the Pilgrim and reader can confront fully the solar brilliance of divine wisdom. By reading through the skin, so to speak, like Dante's mole, by seeing the through the parchment of the poem, the reader perceives a glimmer of this divine light.

Dante fittingly situates his foggy image here and requires his Pilgrim and reader to "see" at the spiritual level. This transitional space, midway through the poem, requires us to engage both our external and internal modes of sensory perception, if we are to rise to the middle level of understanding. To paraphrase Paul, here in Purgatory things are seen darkly through a glass. This is the realm of dreams, the shadowy zone where imagination holds sway:

O imagination, which at times steals us from things outside, which does not leave man aware, even though a thousand trumpets sound, what moves you if the senses offer you nothing? You are moved by the light which is formed in heaven or by the will that sends it. *(Purgatory* 17,11.13-18)

Here we read as the poet calls upon his own "imagination," linking it to the reader's before wondering about its source. But what does he mean by imagination? Following Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas explained it as an interior sense, a kind of treasure chest, into which images are received through the physical senses and within which they are stored. The "light which is formed in heaven" sends down instructively helpful images to engage the reader's imagination. We store images of Geryon, Lucifer and the mole in the treasure chest of memory. As Charles Singleton notes, such "images descend into the mind directly from God, whose will directs them downward" to help us understand things divine *{Purgatory,* p. 379, n. 13-18). This fits nicely with the spherical universe in which Dante situates his *Divine Comedy.* The *Primum Mobile,* the First Mover, drives all of the other spheres, which it contains. In turn, the First Mover is contained by the Empyrean, that heaven which exists only in the mind—in the imagination—of God. This is the source of the poet's inspiration. After crossing from the sphere of the *Primum Mobile* to the Empyrean, the Pilgrim's interior vision takes over. He "sees" via his intellect, while the reader is left longing to duplicate his experience and Dante strives to write what he has seen. Fully aware of the task before him, he summons all his talent to write that final moment: "And I who was coming near the end of all I desired, as I should, raised high the desire burning in me" *(Paradise* 33,11. 46-48).

Shifting to the present tense at the end of his poem, returning to his life in exile, Dante questions his memory before trying to describe his vision of God, the "infinite good" *(Paradise* 33,1. 81). Such a task not surprisingly brings with it descriptive failure, and Dante admits his shortcomings a number of times in *Paradise* 33: at lines 55-66, 67-75, 93-105, 106-08, 121-23, 139-41 and 142-45. In fact, Dante tells us that his memory is obliterated by this sight, and that it would be easier to remember 2500 years back to Jason's voyage with his Argonauts, the first ever: "One moment brings greater forgetfulness than twenty-five centuries..." *(Paradise* 33, 11. 94-96). But since the love of God survives even after human memory fails, Dante can—indeed, must—tell us of that instant when he achieved spiritual stasis, peace in God:

Therefore my mind, completely suspended, was gazing fixed, immobile and intent, and ever desirous to see more In that light one becomes such that it would be impossible to think of turning from it for another sight; because the good, which is the object of the will, is completely gathered in it, and outside of this everything is defective that is perfect here. *(Paradise* 33,11 97-105)

As Mark Musa has written, here the Pilgrim witnesses "the conjoining of substance and accident in God and the union of the temporal and the eternal..." *(Paradise,* p. 397, n. 91-93). To depict as best he can the vision of God, Dante turns to the language of mathematics, to "Geometry, [which] is whitest, in as much as it is without error..," *(The Banquet* 2.13,1. 27). This is the goal toward which his massive poetic machine has moved, and the image of squaring the circle (a feat still unaccomplished) is the perfect figure for the immensity of his task:

Like the geometer who completely sets himself to measuring the circle, and in thinking cannot find the principle which he needs, so was I at that new sight. I wished to see how the image came together in the circle and how it fit there; but my own wings were not sufficient for that, until my mind was smitten by a flash wherein its wish came to it. Here power failed lofty fantasy; but my desire and my will already were turned, like a wheel in balance that is moved by the love which moves the sun and the other stars. *(Paradise* 34,11.133-45)

Undaunted by his undertaking and driven by the impossibility of fulfilling it, Dante strove to mirror Creation and to lead his reader to see the "love which moves the sun and the other stars." Here Pilgrim achieves that full intellectual vision, brief but total and overwhelming understanding of the Godhead, and the reader should, ideally for Dante, desire the same. If this happens, if we experience a slight ray of this burst of light and love through Dante's 700 year-old text, we cannot but characterize the moment and the poem that led us there as brilliant.

Source: Daniel Terkla, for *Epics for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Ferrante notes the relationship between human speech and sin in the Inferno. She notes in particular how the power of speech is distorted or entirely taken from some of the sinners who are suffering in Hell.

In the *De vulgari eloquentia,* Dante reveals the high importance he attaches to human speech—it is the gift which distinguishes man from other creatures. Angels, with direct intuition, and animals, with natural instinct, have no use for it. Only man needs words to reveal his thoughts to others because only man has perceptions which differ from his fellow's and which, taken together, may add up to wisdom. By nature a social animal, man must draw on this wisdom in order to live in society. To have a workable government, he must be able to communicate effectively, hence speech is his most important tool.

Speech is a gift of God, like life itself, bestowed on man so that he can share in the joy of existence and the pleasure of expressing that joy. Although, as Dante points out, God knew what Adam would say, He wanted him to know the happiness of saying it. But because speech is the outward expression of man's reason, it is vulnerable to the same weaknesses of human nature—it is corruptible, always changing. As language moves further and further from its divine source, branching into various tongues and dialects, communication among men becomes increasingly difficult. This opens the way to war among nations, to strife within cities and families.

The connection between speech and sin is of ancient tradition. The confusion of tongues was visited on man at the tower of Babel as divine punishment for his pride. Echoes of this attitude towards language are to be found in the Fathers and in secular writers throughout the Middle Ages. Dante, however, is the first to use a man's speech dramatically as the symbol and betrayer of his sinfulness. ... I should like to suggest that in Dante's use of direct discourse can be seen a conscious artistic pattern which is based on the philosophic view of language expressed in the *De vulgari eloquentia.*

In Hell, the realm of sin from which the "ben delPintelletto," God, and truth are absent, speech has lost the power to communicate in a normal way; men who have denied or abused the use of reason cannot control the outward expression of reason, speech. Either they make sounds without meaning or their words convey a meaning they did not intend. Conversely, in Purgatory, communication is facilitated by an apparent unification of language.... When Dante finds himself beyond the human experience in Paradise, words fail him and he begins to create new ones to describe mystical concepts, "s'india," "intrea," "s'mluia," etc. Thus we have the failure of language as a mode of communication in Hell, the unification of language in Purgatory, and the creation of language in Paradise.

The positive function of language to teach virtue and truth is seen particularly in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso.* The negative effects are found in the *Inferno:* the tongue as a harmful weapon, language as a means of deception, either consciously to harm or

delude the hearer, or unconsciously to betray the speaker himself; we see the danger of too many words, the fear aroused by unintelligible sounds. As speech is what distinguishes man from other animals, the discourse of each sinner in Hell is what distinguishes him and his sin.

Hell itself is a great mouth, "Fampia gola d'Inferno," as Dante calls it in the *Purgatorio (XXI,* 31-32). It is filled with horrid sounds, but its core is the terrible silence of Lucifer, parodying the perfect silence of the Trinity, in Dante's vision *(Par.* XXXHT). As we progress through Hell, we are assailed by disharmonies, wails, screams, curses, barking, hissing, but at the center, completely void of God, truth, good, there is no sound at all. Antithetically, in heaven, after the passage through realms of harmonious sound, which is increasingly difficult for the ear to apprehend, we reach perfect harmony in the utter quiet of the final vision.

The God Dante sees in *Paradiso* XXXHI is light, a light which in Hell is "silent" *(Inf.* I, 60; V, 28). What Dante hears instead as he enters Hell is a Babelic confusion of tongues and sounds: "Sospiri, pianti e alti guai... diverse lingue, orribili favelle, parole di dolore, accenti d'ira, voci alte e fioche, e suon di man" (HI. 22-27). The sounds come from those who have lost "il ben dell'intelletto," without which language cannot function properly. The disintegration of communication is shown in various stages: it is total in the gibberish of Plutus and Nimrod, in the garbled sounds of the submerged, and in the animal noises of the monsters. Some souls can express only laments, some have lost the use of speech altogether, some, whose bodies are hidden in tombs or trees or flames, have nothing but speech left of their humanity and that speech betrays them, belieing the impression they wish to give; others seem normal in appearance and speech, but the very banality of their style reveals their state.

Since effective communication is essential to the proper working of any society, it is not surprising that Dante uses the most blatant examples of non-communication, the gibberish of Plutus and Nimrod, to enclose the sins that threaten the social order (Circles 4 to 8). Outside these circles he sinners who behaved like animals rather than men. Above Plutus' circle, there is only lust and gluttony, sins in which men surrendered to their animal instincts; beyond Nimrod are the traitors, men who, by consciously denying all human bonds to family, state, guest, benefactor, chose to be no better than animals. Plutus guards the circle of avarice, where men are punished for misusing material wealth. It is fitting that his incomprehensible invocation to Satan should introduce this circle, for coins, like words, are a basic medium of exchange in a civilized state—the misuse of either can disrupt the social order. Indeed, Dante often associates sinners with words and sinners with coins: users and blasphemers in the third ring of the seventh circle, falsifiers of coins and words in the tenth *bolgia* of the eighth circle. Plutus, as the classical god of wealth, represents the abuses of that means of exchange, while Nimrod, the biblical tyrant, is responsible for the confusion of tongues that resulted from his building the tower of Babel, according to medieval tradition ... Dante's Nimrod guards a circle in which all human feeling is dead, frozen in a lake of ice. Thus, although speech remains, it no longer has power to move the hearer (cf. Dante's callous treatment of these souls). Here the intent of speech is betrayed not by the words but by the actions that precede and follow them, e.g., the cannibalism of

Ugolino (XXXIII, vv. I and 76-77). Nimrod's non-words, which introduce this circle, prepare us for Lucifer who emits no sound but sends forth a silent and freezing wind of hate, a parody perhaps of the love-inspiring tongues of flame brought to the Apostles by the Holy Spirit.

Though Dante cannot make out the words of Plutus or Nimrod, he instinctively understands the threat in them and is frightened. He has the same reaction to the confused sounds that issue from the *bolgia* of the thieves (Circle 8, seventh *bolgia);* the voice he hears there is "not fit to form words" (XXTV, 65-66), but the sound is angry. The thieves of holy things, who do not recognize ownership, even of what belongs to God, and cannot, therefore, maintain possession of their own bodies, lose their power of speech periodically as they exchange shapes with serpents (the tongue, formerly "united and able to speak" [XXV, 133-134], splits and becomes forked). When they speak, their words are harsh in sound and meaning; they are an attack either on Dante (an ominous prophecy meant to distress him—"e detto l'ho perche doler ti debbia," XXIV, 151), or on God ("Togli, Dio, ch'a te le squadro," XXV, 3). The wrathful, too, who are perceived at first by the bubbles they cause in the mud, have difficulty speaking; they "gurgle a hymn in their throats," since they cannot form complete words (VII, 125-126). When one of them does emerge from the mud, he also attacks Dante. We might note that the rivers of mud, blood, and pitch all discourage speech to some extent, perhaps to contrast with the "fountain that gives rise to a great river of speech," Virgil (1,79-80).

The inability to express one's thoughts puts man on a level with beasts; animal-like sounds and actions, therefore, abound in Hell. Among the incontinent, the gluttons "howl like dogs," while their guardian, the mythological dog, Cerberus, barks from three throats; misers "bark" their shouts at the prodigals; the lustful are carried by a wind that "lows"—only when it is silent can they speak. Usurers lick themselves with their tongues (cf. the counterfeiters whose tongues burn; the thirst for wealth, never sated, led both groups to "make" money, figuratively or literally). Flatterers, whose tongues were "never sated with flattery" make sounds with their snouts.

Most of the sinners give vent to their feelings in moans (grief without words) or curses (a direct perversion of God's gift of speech), but there are others who are unable to make any sound at all: falsifiers of person, who gave up their own personalities to assume someone else's, have lost the expression of personality and rage through the tenth *bolgia* of fraud, silently biting and tearing at others. The false prophets can only weep silently while Virgil, the true prophet, names and describes them to Dante. These are allowed no opportunity to defend themselves or to request sympathy; indeed Virgil harshly condemns the pity Dante feels for their distorted bodies. Their heads are twisted so they face backwards, as if in an extreme "parlasfa" (XX, 16), Dante says, using an odd word for paralysis, probably to incorporate the pun on speech. Some of the schismatics are also deprived of speech, which they had used to tear apart various human and social bonds, and in a particularly graphic way: one has his throat cut and his windpipe exposed, another a slit tongue; Bertran de Born carries his head (the source and outlet of words) in his hand. Dante is so appalled at the sights of this *bolgia* that words fail *him.*

In contrast to those who have lost the power of speech, some sinners—suicides, simoniacs, counselors of fraud—have nothing left of their human selves but speech. The suicides who destroyed their bodies have lost even the semblance of them and are confined within trees and plants. They still have speech, but only at the cost of great pain; when a branch is torn off or a wound made in the bark, blood and words pour out, hissing like sap in a burning green twig. Speech is the only relief they have, but it must be released through suffering.

Simoniacs (Circle 8, third *bolgia)* and counselors of fraud (eighth *bolgia),* whose function on earth should have been to serve men with their tongues, the former to carry the message of love and truth, the latter to advise men towards justice and order, instead abused the highest trusts of church and state. In Hell, not only are they bodiless voices, but their infernal shapes are parodies of the organs of speech. The simoniacs are upside-down in holes that resemble baptismal fonts; their feet project from the "mouths" of the holes like tongues and, in their writhings, express the feelings of the soul. The counselors of fraud are themselves huge tongues of flame, projecting from the "throat" of the *bolgia* (XXVI, 40).

The tongues of flame in which counselors of fraud are enveloped, like the tongues of flame that lick the feet of the simoniacs, are probably another parody of the pentecostal tongues of flame through which the Holy Spirit bestowed the gift of language on the apostles, so they might spread the word of God with especial fervor ....

Those who surrender to the physical appetites, who ignore reason to indulge their passions, rely on words only when they cannot satisfy their physical desires: when the wind of passion stops, they talk; when they were unable to make love, they read about it. And they twist words to justify themselves.

We have seen how little control sinners in Hell have over their speech. They are unable to communicate as they wish, whether because they cannot form intelligible sounds or because their words say more than they intend them to, but the problem of communication is not restricted to sinners or to monsters. Dante, who is both an observer and a participant in the tfiree realms he visits, also has difficulty in expressing himself to Virgil, or in describing what he has seen (XXVIII, 1 ff. and XXXII, 1 ff., though the latter is partly an artful pose—*"If I* had harsh rhymes," he says, using one), or what he thinks (II, 36 and XXX, 139), and sometimes what he hears (K, 14-15 and XIX, 58—60) or reads (HI, 10-12). When speech might be dangerous, distorted by the atmosphere of a certain circle, Virgil is made to understand Dante's thoughts without words (a Power Beatrice frequently exercises in Paradise): in the circle of the pagans, among the heretics, at the approach of fraud (Geryon), among the the hypocrites, and as they leave the falsifiers. In each case, this occurs in the sphere of sinners who dealt in falsehood or in limited truth, where words bear little relation to the truth. The one time Virgil fails to understand is as they enter the *bolgia* of falsifiers, where nothing can be trusted.

When Virgil speaks, his words are usually effective, for he is carrying out God's purpose and he has the command of language that Dante must develop and finally surpass.

Virgil's assertion of the divine will that moves him is sufficient to control most of the guardians of Hell, the classical figures, although they have no power over the fallen angels. And his words have a double effect on Dante, they wound and heal XXXI, 1-3), correct and encourage. It is because of Virgil's "parola ??" (II, 67), his "parlar onesto" (II, 113), that Beatrice summoned him to help Dante. Beatrice, herself moved to speak by the force of love (II, 72), sends the most skillful poetic master of words, Virgil, to teach Dante what he must know in order to move others to good with his words. That, as Dante will learn from Beatrice in Purgatory and from Cacciaguida in Paradise, is the purpose of his journey.

Source: Joan M. Ferrante, "The Relation of Speech to Sin in the Inferno," *Dante Studies,* Vol. LXXXVm, 1969, pp. 33-46

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt from an introduction written in 1948 and first published in 1949, Sayers mentions some of the factors that can make understanding The Divine Comedy *difficult for a modern reader, and offers some pointers for understanding the work.*

The ideal way of reading *The Divine Comedy* would be to start at the first line and go straight through to the end, surrendering to the vigour of the storytelling and the swift movement of the verse, and not bothering about any historical allusions or theological explanations which do not occur in the text itself. That is how Dante himself tackles his subject. His opening words plunge us abruptly into the middle of a situation:

Midway this way of life we're bound upon

I woke to find myself in a dark wood,

Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

From that moment the pace of the narrative never slackens. Down the twenty-four great circles of Hell we go, through the world and out again under the Southern stars; up the two terraces and die seven cornices of Mount Purgatory, high over the sea, high over the clouds to the Earthly Paradise at its summit; up again, whirled from sphere to sphere of the singing Heavens, beyond the planets, beyond the stars, beyond the Primum Mobile, into the Empyrean, there to behold God as He is - the ultimate, the ineffable, yet, in a manner beyond all understanding, "marked with our image" - until, in that final ecstasy,

Power failed high fantasy here, yet, swift to move Even as a wheel moves equal, free from jars, Already my heart and will were wheeled bylove, The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

Yet the twentieth-century reader who starts out on this tremendous journey without any critical apparatus to assist him is liable to get bogged halfway unless he knows something of Dante's theological, political, and personal background. For not only is the poem a religious and political allegory— it is an allegory of a rather special kind. If we know how to read it, we shall find that it has an enormous relevance both to us as individuals and to the world situation of to-day. Dante's Europe—remote and strange as it seemed to the Liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—had much in common with our own distracted times, and his vivid awareness of the deeps and heights within the soulcomes home poignantly to us who have so recently rediscovered the problem of evil, the problem of power, and the ease with which our most God-like imaginings are "betrayed by what is false within". Moreover, Dante is a poet after our own hearts, possessed of a vivid personality, which flows into and steeps the whole texture of his work. Every line he ever wrote is the record of an intimate personal experience; few men have ever displayed their own strength and weakness so unreservedly, or interpreted the universe so consistently in terms of their own self-

exploring. Nor, I suppose, have passionate flesh and passionate intellect ever been fused together in such a furnace of the passionate spirit.....

But if Dante is to "speak to our condition", as the Quakers so charmingly put it, we must take him seriously and ourselves seriously. We must forget a great deal of the nonsense that is talked about Dante —all the legends about his sourness, arrogance, and "obscurity", and especially that libel ... that he was a peevish political exile who indulged his petty spites and prejudices by putting his enemies in Hell and his friends in Paradise. We need not forget that Dante is sublime, intellectual and, on, occasion, grim; but we must also be prepared to find him simple, homely, humorous, tender, and bubbling over with ecstasy. Nor must we look to find in him only a poet of "period" interest; he is a universal poet, speaking prophetically of God and the Soul and the Society of Men in their universal relations.

We must also be prepared, while we are reading Dante, to accept the Chnstian and Catholic view of ourselves as responsible rational beings. We must abandon any idea that we are the slaves of chance, or environment, or our subconscious; any vague notion that good and evil are merely relative terms, or that conduct and opinion do not really matter; any comfortable persuasion that, however shiftlessly we muddle through life, it will somehow or other all come right on the night. We must try to believe that man's will is free, that he can consciously exercise choice, and that his choice can be decisive to all eternity. For *The Divine Comedy* is precisely the drama of the soul's choice. It is not a fairy-story, but a great Christian allegory, deriving its power from the terror and splendour of the Christian revelation. Clear, hard thought went to its making: its beauty is of that solid and indestructible sort that is built upon a framework of nobly proportioned bones. If we ignore the theological structure, and merely browse about in it for detached purple passages and poetic bits and pieces we shall be disappointed, and never see the architectural grandeur of the poem as a whole. People who tackle Dante in this superficial way seldom get beyond the picturesque squalors of the *Inferno .* This is as though we were to judge a great city after a few days spent underground among the cellars and sewers; it would not be surprising if we were to report only an impression of sordidness, suffocation, rats, fetor, and gloom. But the grim substructure is only there for the sake of the city whose walls and spires stand up and take the morning; it is for the vision of God in the *Paradiso* that all the rest of the allegory exists.

Allegory is the interpretation of experience by means of images. In its simplest form it is a kind of extended metaphor. Supposing we say: "John very much wanted to do so-and-so, but hesitated for fear of the consequences"; that is a plain statement. If we say: "In John's mind desire and fear contended for the mastery" we are already beginning to speak allegorically: John's mind has become a field of battle in which two personified emotions are carrying on a conflict. From this we can easily proceed to build up a full-blown allegory. We can represent the object of John's ambition as a lady imprisoned in a castle, which is attacked by a knight called Desire and defended by a giant called Fear, and we can put in as much description of the place and people as will serve to make the story exciting. We can show Desire so badly battered by Fear that he is discouraged and ready to give up, until rebuked by his squire, called Shame, who takes him to have his wounds dressed by a cheerful lady named Hope. Later, he is accosted

by a plausible stranger called Suspicion, who says that the lady is much less virtuous and good-looking than she is made out to be And so forth, introducing as many personifications of this kind as may be needed to express John's successive changes of mind. In this way we can work out quite a complicated psychological pattern, and at the same time entertain the reader with an exciting and colourful tale of adventure. In this purest kind of allegory, John himself "never appears: his psyche is merely the landscape in which his personified feelings carry out their manoeuvres. But there is also a form in which John himself—or what we may perhaps call John's conscious self, or super-self—figures among the personages of the allegory, as a pilgrim or knight-errant, exploring the wildernesses of his own soul and fighting against opposition both from within and without. The earlier part of *The Romance of the Rose* is an example of the first kind of allegory and *The Pilgrim's Progress* of the second. In neither kind does the actual story pretend to be a relation of fact; in its *literal* meaning, the whole tale is fiction; the *allegorical* meaning is the true story.

Dante's allegory is more complex. It differs from the standard type in two ways: (1) in its *literal* meaning, the story is—up to a certain point and with a great many important qualifications—intended to be a true story; (2) the figures of the allegory, instead of being personified abstractions, are *symbolic personages.*

To take the second point first: In dealing with the vexed subject of symbolism, we shall save ourselves much bewilderment of mind by realising that there are two kinds of symbols.

A *conventional* symbol is a sign, arbitrarily chosen to represent, or "stand for", something with which it has no integral connection: thus the scrawl X may, by common agreement, stand, in mathematics, for an unknown quantity; in the alphabet, for a sound composed of a cluck and a hiss; at the end of a letter, for a fond embrace. The figure X *is* not, in itself, any of these things and tells us nothing about them. Any other sign would serve the same purpose if we agreed to accept it so, nor is there any reason why the same sign should not stand, if we agreed that it should, for quite different things: infinity, or a murmuring sound, or a threat. With this kind of symbol we need not now concern ourselves, except to distinguish it from the other.

A *natural* symbol is not an arbitrary sign, but a thing really existing which, by its very nature, stands for and images forth a greater reality of which it is itself an instance. Thus an arch, maintaining itself as it does by a balance of opposing strains, is a *natural symbol* of that stability in tension by which the whole universe maintains itself. Its significance is the same in all languages and in all circumstances, and may be applied indifferently to physical, psychical, or spiritual experience. Dante's symbolism is of this kind. To avoid confusion with the conventional or arbitrary symbol I shall follow the example of Charles Williams and others and refer to Dante's natural symbols as his "images".

We are now in a position to distinguish between a simple allegorical figure and a symbolic image. The allegorical figure is a personified abstraction. Thus, in an *allegorical masque,* Tyranny might be represented as a demon with a club in one hand

and a set of fetters in the other, riding in a juggernaut chariot drawn by tigers over the bodies of Youth, Innocence, Happiness, and what-not, and declaiming sentiments appropriate to tyrannical passions. In a play using *symbolicimagery,* the dramatist might bring in the figure of Nero or Hitler, wearing his ordinary clothes and simply talking like Nero or Hitler, and every one would understand that this personage was meant for the image of Tyranny.

In the *Comedy,* Dante uses the allegorical figure only occasionally; by far the greater number of his figures are symbolic images. Thus, he is accompanied through Hell, not by a personified abstraction called Reason, or Wisdom, or Science, or Art, or Statecraft, but by Virgil the Poet, a real person, who is, by his own nature, qualified to symbolize all these abstractions. The characters encountered in the circles of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise are similarly not personifications of Sin and Virtue, but the souls of real people, represented as remaining in, or purging off, their sins or experiencing the fruition of their virtues.

Being thus real personages, the images of the *Divine Comedy* are set in a real environment: Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven are not a fiction invented to carry the allegory, but a true picture of the three states of the life after death. I do not, of course, mean by this that Dante's description of them is meant to be physically accurate. He did not really suppose that Hell was a pit extending from a little way below the foundations of Jerusalem to the centre of the earth, or that Purgatory was a mountainous island in the Antipodes, or that a person could go from one to the other in his mortal body in the space of two and a half days; nor did he really imagine that Heaven was located among the celestial spheres. He takes the utmost pains to make his geographical details plausible and scientifically correct; but that is just the novelist's method of giving verisimilitude to the story. Dante knew better, and from time to time he warns his readers against mistaking a work of the imagination for a bald statement of material fact. He did, however, share the belief of all Catholic Christians that every living soul in the world has to make the choice between accepting or rejecting God, and that at the moment of death it will discover what it has chosen: whether to remain in the outer darkness of the alien self, knowing God only as terror and judgment and pain, or to pass joyfully through the strenuous purgation which fits it to endure and enjoy eternally the unveiled presence of God.

But although the *literal story* of the *Comedy* is (with the qualification and within the limits I have mentioned) a true one, and the characters in it are real people, the poem is nevertheless an allegory. The literal meaning is the least important part of it: the story with its images is only there for the sake of the truth which it symbolizes, and the real environment within which all the events take place is the human soul

We are apt to be astonished at first, in reading (say) the *Inferno,* to find how little is actually said about the particular sin of which Dante and we are witnessing the retribution. Sometimes the souls relate their histories (as do Francesca da Rimini, for instance, and Guido da Montefeltro), but even then there is little or no moralizing on the subject. More often there is merely a description of the conditions in which the sinners find themselves, after which a character is introduced and talks with Dante upon some

apparently extraneous matter which is closely related, indeed, to the subject of the *Comedy* taken as a whole, but has no special relevancy to the immediate circumstances. In showing us his images, Dante has already told us all we need to know about the sin. He has introduced us, for example, to Ciacco—a rich and amiable Florentine gentleman, well known and much ridiculed by his contemporaries for his monstrous self-indulgence: the familiar name is enough to remind contemporary readers of what Gluttony looks like to the world; he has also shown us the conditions of Ciacco's part of Hell—a cold wallowing in mud under the fangs and claws of Cerberus: that, stripped of all glamour, is what Gluttony is, seen in its true and eternal nature. Why waste more words upon it? Let Ciacco and Dante converse upon the state of Florence.

We now begin to see the necessity for all the notes and explanations with which editors feel obliged to encumber the pages of Dante. To the fourteenth-century Italian, the personages of the *Comedy* were familiar. To identify them, and to appreciate the positions they occupy in the Three Kingdoms of the After-world, was to combine an understanding of the allegorical significance with the excitement of a *chronique scandaleuse* and the intellectual entertainment of solving one of the more enigmatical varieties of cross-word puzzle. For us it is different. We do not know these people; nor indeed are we to-day quite so familiar with our classical authors, or even with our Bible, as a medieval poet might reasonably expect his public to be....

We need to know what Dante's characters stood for in his eyes, and therefore we need to know who they were. But that is as much as we need. The purely historical approach to a work of art can easily be overdone by the general reader. Just because it puts the thing away into a "period", it tends to limit its relevance to that period....

The poem is an allegory of the Way to God—to that union of our wills with the Universal Will in which every creature finds its true self and its true being. But, as Dante himself has shown, it may be interpreted at various levels. It may be seen, for example, as the way of the artist, or as the way of the lover—both these ways are specifically included in the imagery. For many of us it may be easier to understand Hell as the picture of a corrupt society than as that of a corrupt self. Whichever we start with, it is likely to lead to the other, and it does not much matter by which road we come to Dante so long as we get to him in the end.

We cannot, of course, do without the historical approach altogether, for the poem is largely concerned with historical events. Neither can we do altogether without the biographical approach, since the poem is so closely concerned with the poet's personal experience. The allegory is universal, but it is so precisely because it is a man's answer to a situation—a particular man and a particular situation in time and place, The man is Dante; the time is the beginning of the fourteenth century; the place is Florence. All Heaven and Earth and Hell are, in a sense, included within that narrow compass.

Source: Dorothy L Sayers, in an introduction to *Dante: The Divine Comedy,* by Dante Alighien, translated by Dorothy L Sayers, Penguin Books, 1949, pp. 9-66.

Adaptations

The *Divine Comedy,* or parts of it, has inspired a number of films: Giuseppe de Liguoro directed a silent feature in 1912, called *Dante's Inferno;* in 1924, Henry Otto directed another silent version with the same title. In 1935 Harry Lachman directed Spencer Tracy, Claire Trevor, Rita Hay worth, Yakima Cannutt and Dorothy Dix in a firm called *Dante's Inferno,* about a carnival concession that shows scenes from Dante's poem. Peter Greenaway produced *TV Dante: The Inferno Cantos I-VIII.* Greenaway shot his film on video for Channel Four television in Great Britain, where it aired in 1989. Tom Phillips wrote the screenplay for this highly stylized, almost experimental, interpretation of the first eight cantos of the *Inferno.* It features Sir John Gielgud as Virgil, Bob Peck as Dante's Pilgrim, and Joanne Whalley-Kilmer as Beatrice. Hard to find since its television debut, Greenaway and Phillips' graphic version is available as a Films for the Humanities videocassette. It runs 90 minutes and has been retitled *The Inferno.*

Dante's work has inspired classical composers. In 1980 Carlo Maria Guihni, Dame Janet Baker, the Philharmorua Chorus and Philharmonia Orchestra of London recorded Giuseppe Verdi's (1813-1901) *Four Sacred Pieces.* This work sets some of Dante's texts to music and is available on a His Master's Voice recording. The thirty-fourth and final canto of Dante's *Inferno,* along with poetry by Francesco Petrarch (1304-1374), e.e. cummings (1894-1962), and Ezra Pound (1885-1972), inspired Eric Ericson's modern choir music in 1987. Ericson's contemporary compositions are available on a compact disc produced by Phono Sueica in Stockholm.

The tradition of illustrating Dante's poem goes back almost to its composition in the early fourteenth century. Peter H. Brieger's two volume *Illuminated Manuscripts of the Divine Comedy* includes commentaries by the eminent Dante scholar Charles S. Singleton, along with a wealth of manuscript illuminations. Princeton University Press published it in 1969. Giovanni di Paolo (1403-1482) illustrated the last section of Dante's epic, the *Paradise.* John Wyndham Pope-Hennessy edited and published these illustrations with Random House in New York in 1993 under the title. *Paradiso: The Illuminations to Dante's Divine Comedy by Giovanni di Paolo.* Sandro Botticelli (1444-1510) illustrated the entire *Divine Comedy.* Sir Kenneth Clark brought out an edition of Botticelli's work in 1976 with Thames and Hudson publishers in London. The English visionary poet, William Blake (1757-1827), did a famous set of illustrations for Dante's epic. In 1953 Albert S. Roe published these as *Blake's Illustrations to the Divine Comedy.* Greenwood of Westport Connecticut reissued Roe's 1953 collection in 1977. Paddington Press in New York reissued Gustave Dore's (1832-1883) famous 1861 illustrations of the *Inferno* in 1976. This large-format edition, *Inferno Dore: The Vision of Hell by Dante Alighieri* also contains Henry Cary' s translation of the poem and is available in paperback.

Students of Dante's work now have a variety of Internet sites to visit. A good place to start is the ILT Web Digital Dante Project. Jennifer Hogan of Columbia University in New York edits this wide-ranging page, which provides, among other things, the complete texts of the *Divine Comedy* in facing-page Italian and English format. The translation is

by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882). Also available are links to sites providing: other works by Dante; images of medieval art; a variety of Bibles; classical, medieval and Renaissance writing connected to Dante and his work; Sandro Botticelli, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) and Gustave Dore's images. The site's address is: http://daemon.ilt.columbia.edu/projects/dante/index.html.

Topics for Further Study

Compare Aeneas's encounter with the souls of the dead in Book Six of Virgil's *Aeneid* to Dante's Pilgrim's meetings with some dead souls in the *Inferno.* How are the encounters similar? How are they different? Why?

Choose either *Inferno,* the Mount of Purgatory, or the heavenly rose in *Paradise Lost.* Following Dante's description, and consulting any modern illustrations you are able to find, redraw the levels. Choose five levels and put contemporary public figures on them. Give reasons for your choices and placements, according to Dante's explanation of what happens on each level.

Dante lived in political exile while he wrote the *Divine Comedy.* Research the politics of early fourteenth-century Florence. Use your research findings to explain Dante's criticism of his own city in *Inferno* or *Purgatory.* Focus on no more than two characters.

Dante's love for Beatrice Portinari was at first physical and earthly, and he wrote love poetry to her. He later idealized his love as something pure and holy, apart from physical attraction. Research their historical relationship. Explain how Dante in *Purgatory* and/or *Paradise* turned Beatrice into his teacher and guide to salvation.

Compare and Contrast

circa 1300: Dante's understanding of the universe, knowledge of which is key to understanding his work, was based upon the ideas of the Greek astronomer, mathematician and geographer, Claudius Ptolemy (circa B.C. 100-circa 178). Ptolemy asserted that the stars and planets were embedded in crystalline spheres that revolved around the earth. This geocentric (earth-centered) belief placed earth and humanity at the center of all creation, in the location of greatest importance.

Late twentieth century: In 1543 the Polish scholar, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543), published his theory that replaced Ptolemy's. Copernicus argued that the earth is not the center of the universe, but that it and all the planets in our solar system revolve around the sun. This heliocentric (sun-centered) system changed classical and medieval notions of humanity's importance in the grand scheme of creation and became the foundation of modern astronomy.

circa 1300: Dante believed that the southern hemisphere was covered with water and therefore uninhabitable. World maps from the period illustrate this view and show only the inhabited northern hemisphere. Dante's creation and placement of the Mountain of Purgatory—with the Garden of Eden at its peak—in the apparently uninhabited southern region were original to him. Nonetheless, he followed mapmaking conventions, also illustrated on some medieval world maps, which held that the Garden was, although earthly, very hard to reach. Such maps usually place it in the east, sometimes as an island, and show it surrounded by stone walls and a ring of fire. This is the island Ulysses and his crew see *(Inferno* 26,11.133-42), the one Virgil describes to Dante the Pilgrim as they leave Hell *(Inferno* 34, 1. 121) and is the one the two climb in *Purgatory.*

Late twentieth century: Just after Dante's time, in the early fourteenth century, seamen began to travel more widely and mapped much more of the oceans, seas and shorelines. The Age of Exploration produced more accurate maps that changed dramatically the way people like Dante saw the earth. This image has changed even more with space exploration in the last decades of the twentieth century.

circa 1300: Although Western Europe during Dante's time was changing and expanding rapidly, it was still fundamentally hierarchical in nature—highly ordered. Christians believed that God presided over all, much like a king or emperor, and that they and all things were arranged under him in order of descending importance. The world of Dante's *Divine Comedy,* his universe, owes its shape and structure to such hierarchical notions. Beatrice and St. Bernard explain this to Dante the Pilgrim, when they show him how God's love moves and orders the universe *(Paradise* 27-33).

Late twentieth century: Social structures clearly differ in the late twentieth century, although traces of medieval hierarchies remain, as do systems of class. Since at least the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, much of humanity has become more skeptical, less ready to put all its faith in a divinely-ordered universe like Dante's.

circa 1300: During Dante's time, the Christian Church was perhaps the strongest institution in Europe, The Pope's power was rivaled only by that of the Emperor, and the two were often in conflict. Along with its spiritual duties, the Church was involved in world and local politics, and learned men in all regions the Church reached spoke its language, Latin.

Late twentieth century: There is no comparable global power in the late twentieth century. No single institution has such a far-ranging spiritual and political reach. The United States perhaps comes closest as a world leader. English is fast becoming the global language, due early on to the scope of the British Empire and now to the strength of American business and tourism interests round the globe.

What Do I Read Next?

Vita Nuova {New Life) is Dante's earliest major work. In *Dante's Vita Nuova; A Translation and an Essay* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1973), translator and editor Mark Musa combines 31 poems with explanatory prose and treats Dante's love for Beatrice Portinari.

Reliable English translations of Dante's lyrics can be found in *Dante's Lyric Poetry* (2 volumes, translated and with commentary by Kenelm Foster and Patrick Boyde, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967)

In *Literary Criticism of Dante Alighieri* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973), Robert S. Haller has collected, translated and edited Dante's own writings about literature, including the important "Letter to Can Grande," in which Dante explains how to read and understand his *Divine Comedy.*

Saint Augustine's *Confessions* had a profound influence on Dante. A wonderful translation of this work by R. S. Pine-Coffin *(Confessions,* by Saint Augustine (354-430), translated by R. S. Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1961) makes this work accessible to students.

The *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (4757-525?), a Roman philosopher and statesman, is an important philosophical treatment of free will and predestination—issues examined by Dante in *Divine Comedy.* The translation of this work by Richard Green is the English standard for students *(The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, translated and with introduction and notes by Richard Green, The Library of the Liberal Arts, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merril Co., 1962).

Giovanni Boccaccio and Leonardo Bruni Aretino, authors in their own rights, wrote early biographies of Dante. Boccaccio's came some fifty years after Dante died, and Aretino's followed soon after. The biographies have been translated by James Robinson Smith and can be found in *The Earliest Lives of Dante* (1901; rpt. New York: Ungar, 1963).

Although Dante did not read Homer's epic *The Odyssey,* he knew its basic plot, was influenced by it and, like most readers, was probably awed by Homer's genius. Odysseus' trip to the Underworld, the realm of dead souls, influenced Virgil, whose *Aeneid* was Dante's poetic model. A good translation of *The Odyssey* is by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Classics, 1961, 1963).

John Milton's *Paradise Lost,* the great Protestant epic of the seventeenth century, tells the story of Adam and Eve's fall from grace and is in some ways a commentary on Dante's Catholic *Comedy.* Scott Eledge's edition of *Paradise Lost* is an excellent one (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

Any reader of Dante's work needs a good Bible, one with solid notes and cross references. *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha: The Oxford Study Edition*

(general editor, Samuel Sandmel, New York: Oxford University Press, 1976) is an excellent edition for student use.

Virgil leads Dante's Pilgrim through Hell and to Beatncein Purgatory. Virgil's own epic tale, *The Aeneid,* tells the story of Aeneas' founding Rome. This work, along with much of Virgil's poetry, had a profound impact on Dante. Aeneas' trip to the Underworld in *Aeneid* 6 was a model for Dante's Pilgrim's trip through hell. A fine translation of Virgil's epic is *The Aeneid of Virgil,* translated by Allen Mandelbaum, 1961 (reprint, New York: Bantam Books, 1985).

Further Study

Alighien, Dante *The Divine Comedy, Vol 1 Inferno, Vol II-Purgatory; Vol. Ill: Paradise,* translated and with notes by Mark Musa, Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1984. Musa's unrhymed verse translation comes close to representing the meter and sense of Dante's difficult *terza nma* This eminent Dante scholar provides a summary of each canto at its start, very thorough explanatory notes, illustrations and bibliography.

The Divine Comedy, translated and with notes and commentary by Charles S Singleton, 3 vols, Bolhngen Series 80, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970-75. Singleton's facing-page, prose translation is considered by many to be the best and is therefore the critical edition of Dante's epic poem. His notes and commentary are the most thorough and provide full texts of all references, in both English and their original languages

The Portable Dante, edited and with introduction and notes by Mark Musa, New York: Viking Penguin, 1995 This single-volume paperback brings together Musa's earlier translations of *Inferno, Purgatory, Paradise* and the *Vita Nuova* Like the earlier Penguin editions, this volume contains summaries of each canto, a select bibliography and illustrations. Unlike in the Penguin editions, Musa's commentary here appears in concise footnote form

Bergin, Thomas G., ed. *Dante: His Life, His Times, His Works,* New York American Heritage Press, 1968 This older introductory study includes an anthology of excerpts from Dante's writings, along with a number of useful sections: a brief biography, a select chronology of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a section on the arts of the time, and one on the characters in the *Divine Comedy*

Bergin, Thomas G *Dante,* New York: Orion, 1965. A classic, scholarly study.

Chiarenza, Marguerite Mills *The Divine Comedy Tracing God's Art,* Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989

A study targeted to students who are new to the *Divine Comedy* Chiarenza provides accessible information on historical context, reception, and theimportance of the poem, along with a reading of each canticle, a rather detailed chronology (1215-1321) and a nicely annotated bibliography

Davis, Charles T. "Dante's Italy," in his *Dante's Italy and Other Essays,* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984, pp. 1-22.

Focuses upon Dante's views about language, in particular on his views about the power of Italian (not Latin) poetry His political and religious views are also discussed.

Demaray, John G *The Invention of Dante's Commedia,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.

Demaray argues that Dante modeled his heavenly pilgrimage on real-life medieval pilgrimages to the Holy Land, and provides a good deal of historical and cultural information about such pilgrimages.

Fowhe, Wallace *A Reading of Dante's Inferno,* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981

Fowlie provides an analysis of each canto from the first canticle of Dante's epic Each entry concludes with a helpful section, "Principal Signs and Symbols," and the work as a whole ends with an instructive section entitled "Note on Reading Dante Today "

Freccero, John *Dante: The Poetics of Conversion,* edited and with an introduction by Rachel Jacoff, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986.

A difficult but valuable collection of essays by the premier American Dante scholar. Freccero's readings of selected cantos of Dante's poem offers unique and original insights

Fnedench, Werner P *Dante's Fame Abroad: 1350-1850,* Studies in Comparative Literature 2, Chapel Hill, N.C: University of North Carolina Press, 1950.

A comprehensive overview of existing scholarship on Dante's infuence on the Poets and Scholars of the United States and Europe

Giamatti, A Bartlett, ed. *Dante in America: The First Two Centuries,* Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 23, Binghamton, N Y: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1983

This collection of essays, edited by the eminent scholar and former Commissioner of Major League Baseball, gathers together important critical studies by American scholars from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

Kirkpatrick, Robin *Dante- The Divine Comedy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

A scholarly study that includes a section on Dante's development as a poet, an extended reading of each canticle, a short essay on Dante's "impact," and a useful "guide to further reading "

Kleiner, John. *Mismapping the Underworld- Daring and Error in Dante's "Comedy",* Stanford, Calif.. Stanford University Press, 1994.

Kleiner investigates Dante's "enthusiasm for error," and fruitfully works against a critical tradition that seeks perfection in the *Divine Comedy.*

Mazzeo, Joseph Anthony. *Medieval Cultural Tradition in Dante's "Comedy* "Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1968 This fundamental collection of essays by a renowned

Dante scholar deals with the structure of the *Divine Comedy* and solidly sets the poem in its cultural context.

Musa, Mark "The 'Sweet New Style' I Hear," in his *Advent at the Gates: Dante's "Comedy."* Bloomington, Ind.. Indiana University Press, 1974, pp. 111-28.

One of America's foremost Dante scholars explains the poet's *dolce stil novo,* the "sweet new style" of lyric poetry in which Dante and some of his contemporaries wrote.

Quinones, Ricardo J *Dante Ahghieri,* Boston Twayne Publishers, 1979

Quinones discusses Dante's life and each work in the context of their cultural and historical events Quinones chronology (1215-1321) is less informative than Chiarenza' s but provides a much more detailed history of Dante in his time

Thompson, David *Dante's Epic Journeys,* Baltimore- Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Accessible study providing a good discussion of Dante's use of workd by Homer and Virgil

Toynbee, Paget *Dante Ahghieri: His Life and Works,* 4th ed, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1971

Toynbee's work, originally published in 1901, was long the standard biographical and historical study of Dante's life It contains still-useful background information.

Toynbee, Paget *Dante Dictionary,* rev. ed., edited by Charles S Singleton, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965

Toynbee's original title, *A Dictionary of Proper Names and Notable Matters in the Works of Dante,* gives a general indication of its scope. First published in 1889, this work remains one the most valuable aids to the student of Dante's works.

Yates, Frances A. *The Art of Memory,* Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1966.

Dated but still useful, especially for those interested in the role memory plays in texts like Dante's.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Epics for Students (EfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, EfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of EfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of EfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in EfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by EfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

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The editor of Epics for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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