

Dante Overview

Introduction to The Divine Comedy

• Who was Dante Alighieri?

Dante, of course, is the author of The Divine Comedy. He was born a Roman Catholic in Florence in 1265 C.E. He died of malaria in Ravenna, Italy, in 1321 (the night of Sept. 13-14). He remains buried in Ravenna, although an empty tomb in Florence is dedicated to him. Dante is known for his ability as a world-class poet, for his interest in politics, and for being exiled from Florence. In a way, he remains exiled from Florence, as his body is not in a tomb in Florence.

• What is The Divine Comedy in essence?

The Divine Comedy tells about Dante's imaginative journey through the afterlife. Dante finds himself in a dark wood of error, and his guide, Virgil, the author of the Roman epic The Aeneid takes Dante through the Inferno (Hell), and up the Mountain of Purgatory to the Forest of Eden. There Beatrice, Dante's beloved who died early in life, takes over as Dante's guide, and the two ascend the spheres of Paradise, until finally Dante, with the aid of another guide and of the Virgin Mary, is able to see God face to face. These three parts of Dante's imaginative journey make up the three parts of The Divine Comedy: the Inferno, the Purgatorio, and the Paradiso. In The Divine Comedy, Dante tells the reader how to achieve Paradise. In addition, the epic is a love story. A woman takes it upon herself to save Dante.

• How long does the journey in The Divine Comedy take?

Considering all the distance that is traveled, it doesn't take long at all. It begins on the night before Good Friday and ends on Easter Wednesday of the year 1300, when Dante was 35 years old (midway through his three score and ten years). The journey takes roughly five and a half days. The year 1300 is significant other than being the midpoint of Dante's life. In 1300, spiritual repentance and spiritual renewal were major themes of the Catholic Church's first Holy Year.

• What is the scope of The Divine Comedy?

Herman Melville, author of Moby Dick, once said that in order to write a mighty book, an author needs to choose a mighty theme. By choosing the afterlife as his theme, Dante chose a mighty theme. He writes about the Inferno and how sins are punished, about Purgatory and how sins are purged, and about paradise and how good souls are rewarded. In doing this, he writes about many themes that are important to the people of his time and to the people of our time and to people of any time: religion, God, poetry, politics, etc.

• Is The Divine Comedy universal?

"Universal" means applicable to anyone, at any time, and anywhere. Yes, The Divine Comedy is universal. One need not be a Christian to enjoy and learn from The Divine Comedy. All of us sin, and probably most of us regret sinning. Many people can identify with the characters of The Divine Comedy. For example, Francesca da Rimini refuses to take responsibility for her actions, instead casting blame on other people. Many of us have done exactly the same thing. Reading The Divine Comedy seriously will

take some work. Readers will need to know something about Dante's biography, about the history of his time and previous eras, and about literature. However, The Divine Comedy is relevant to our lives today.

What are some of the really big issues that are of concern to The Divine Comedy?

One big issue is sin. For example, what are the results of sin?

One big issue is spiritual transformation. For example, how can one purge him- or herself of sin?

One big issue is politics. For example, Dante warns the reader about the dangers of extreme factionalism.

One big issue is poetry. How can poetry help us?

Briefly, what are the major facts of the biography of Dante the Poet?

Dante was born in 1265 in Florence, Italy. He was successful in both poetry and politics. Early, he fell in love with Beatrice, a woman who died young in 1290. Both Dante and Beatrice married other people. About Beatrice Dante wrote a group of poems that he published in a volume (with commentary) titled Vita Nuova (The New Life). Dante was a member of the political group known as the Guelfs, but when the Guelfs split into rival factions, he became a White Guelf. The White Guelfs opposed the Pope and wanted Florence to be free from papal power, while the Black Guelfs supported the Pope and were willing to do his bidding if he put them in power. Not surprisingly, Pope Boniface VIII supported the Black Guelfs, and he sent troops to Florence who took over the city in November of 1301. We can date Dante's exile from Florence at this time, but he was officially exiled in January of 1302. Dante never returned to Florence. While in exile, Dante composed his masterpiece: The Divine Comedy. He died on Ravenna in 1321 at age 56.

• What does the title The Divine Comedy mean?

Dante called his poem the Commedia or Comedy. In the 16th century, the word Divina or Divine was added to the title to show that it was a work rooted in religion.

The Divine Comedy is a "comedy" for two reasons:

- 1) The Divine Comedy was not written in Latin, but was instead written in the "vulgar" language of Italian. Being written in a "vulgar" language, the vernacular, it is written in a language that was regarded as not suited for tragedy.
- 2) The epic poem has a happy ending

The Divine Comedy is an allegory. Define "allegory."

An allegory has a double meaning. It can be understood on a literal level, but also present is a symbolic level. On the literal level, Dante the Pilgrim travels through the Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise. On the symbolic level, a human soul who will be saved faces trials, overcomes them, and achieves Paradise. Allegories have many symbols