

Context – Dante’s *Divine Comedy*

Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 in Florence, Italy, to a family of moderate wealth that had a history of involvement in the complex Florentine political scene. Around 1285, Dante married a woman chosen for him by his family, although he remained in love with another woman— Beatrice, whose true historical identity remains a mystery. Around the time of Beatrice's death, Dante began a serious study of philosophy and intensified his political involvement in Florence. He held a number of significant public offices at a time of great political unrest in Italy, and, in 1302, he was exiled for life by the leaders of the Black Guelphs, the political faction in power at the time. All of Dante's work on *The Comedy* (later called *The Divine Comedy*, and consisting of three books: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*) was done after his exile. He completed *Inferno*, which depicts an allegorical journey through Hell, around 1314. Dante roamed from court to court in Italy, writing and occasionally lecturing, until his death from a sudden illness in 1321.

Despite the important historical context of the work, the *Comedy* is far from merely a political allegory. *Inferno* is, for one, the exercise of an astounding intellect that handled writers such as Aristotle, Ovid, Virgil, and Thomas Aquinas with ease and skill. The *Comedy* is also a landmark in the development of European language and literature, for it stands as the greatest medieval poem written in vernacular language—the common tongue of a people. Critics spanning nearly seven centuries have praised its poetic beauty and compass, virtually unmatched by any other medieval poem. Additionally, medieval Italy was home to scores of regional dialects; Dante's use of his native Tuscan dialect in *The Comedy* helped to unify the Italian language, which is rooted in Tuscan more than in any other Italian dialect. Before Dante, major literary works were almost always written in Latin, the language of the Roman Empire and the Catholic Church; no one had considered the vernacular capable of poetic expression of the caliber of Virgil's *Aeneid*, for example. Dante acknowledges the seeming folly of such an attempt by entitling his masterpiece *The Comedy* (the adjective *Divine*, indicating the religious nature of the work, was added in the sixteenth century). Obviously, Dante's choice to call his work a comedy does not mean that the poem is intended to be humorous. Rather, the word "comedy" refers to one of the two classical styles, the other being tragedy. Tragedy was the high style, the style of epics, with plots that flowed from a promising beginning to a destructive end. Comedy was the low style, the style of grotesque caricatures, with plots that flowed from an unhappy beginning to a happy end.

The title *The Comedy* is thus appropriate in two ways. First, the poem is written in the vernacular, which was considered appropriate only for a comedy. Second, the plot mirrors the flow of a classical comedy, progressing from the horrors of Hell to the joys of Heaven. Despite his seeming modesty, however, Dante was confident both that his poetry surpassed that of any other vernacular writer and that he could use the high, tragic style to perfection, as he had proved in *Vita Nuova*. *The Comedy* is not exclusively "high" or "low"; rather, it is a truly universal work. It deals with one of the great questions of humanity: the existence of an afterlife and the consequences of our lives on earth. For Dante, this question was worthy of calling upon philosophers and poets alike, and of utilizing every available style, as he does throughout *Inferno*.

Plot Overview

Inferno opens on the evening of Good Friday in the year 1300.... Traveling through a dark wood, Dante Alighieri meets Virgil who says that their path will take them through Hell and that they will eventually reach Heaven, where Dante's beloved Beatrice awaits. The two enter hell and pass through Limbo.

The First Circle of Hell, Limbo, houses pagans, who died without knowing of Christ. The Second Circle of Hell is reserved for the sin of Lust. In the Third Circle of Hell, the Gluttonous must lie in mud and endure a rain of filth and excrement. In the Fourth Circle, the Avaricious and the Prodigal are made to charge at one another with giant boulders. The Fifth Circle of Hell contains the river Styx, a swampy, fetid cesspool in which the Wrathful spend eternity struggling with one another; the Sullen lie bound beneath the Styx's waters, choking on the mud.

Virgil and Dante proceed to the city of Dis and an angelic messenger arrives from Heaven to force the gates open before Dante. The Sixth Circle of Hell houses the Heretics. A deep valley leads into the Seventh Circle of Hell, where those who were violent toward others spend eternity in a river of boiling blood, enduring eternity in the form of bleeding trees, being crucified, and otherwise tortured depending on their exact form of violence.

In the Eighth Circle of Hell, various types of false councilors receive lashings from whips, lie in a river of human feces, hang upside down in baptismal fonts while their feet burn with fire, are forced to walk with their heads on backward, are steeped in pitch while demons tear them apart, be trapped in a pit of vipers, and being constantly afflicted by wounds that open and close repeatedly.

The Ninth Circle of Hell contains those who betrayed their kin are entombed in a frozen lake, the amount of their submersion depending on whether they betrayed country, guests, or benefactors. Dante approaches the three-headed giant Lucifer, plunged waist-deep into the ice. His body pierces the center of the Earth, where he fell when God hurled him down from Heaven. Each of Lucifer's mouths chews one of history's three greatest sinners. Eventually, the poets emerge from Hell on Easter morning, just before sunrise.

As the pilgrims entered Purgatory, an angel inscribed the letter "P" on Dante's forehead seven times, to represent the seven deadly sins (pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust). As Dante made his way through the seven areas reserved for those who committed each of these sins, the letters were erased one by one, and the climb became less difficult. Like Hell, Purgatory was arranged in terraces. However, the inhabitants here could, through confession, repentance, patience, and the prayers of the living, move on to higher realms after a time of proper purification. Each terrace in turn was designed to purge its dead souls of one particular deadly sin.

The travelers finally moved beyond the seventh terrace. An angel directed them to pass through a huge wall of flames; on the other side they would find Beatrice. Dante did not hesitate. Emerging from the flames, he saw a mountain. At its summit, Virgil bade Dante farewell, for this was as far as Human Reason would allow a non-Christian to go.

Dante noticed a beautiful garden nearby, and began to explore it. A young woman appeared to inform him that this was the Garden of Eden - and there, across a river, awaited Beatrice. But the woman called out to Dante, demanding that, before entering the stream, he stop to acknowledge remorse for his sins and confess them. Hearing her, Dante was so overcome with remorse that he fainted and had to be carried across Lethe, the river of forgetfulness of past sins.

On the other side of the river, accompanied now at last by the beautiful Beatrice, Dante discovered that Paradise was divided into various spheres orbiting the earth. Ascending through the spheres, Dante encountered various famous saints, martyrs, and crusaders, in addition to many of the just, the chaste and the meditative. At last Dante was conducted to the ninth heaven (outerspace), where he received grace, and was permitted to gaze upon divinity and hear the angels' chorus. Dante is finally left alone to behold the glory of God on his throne.