INTO HELL AND BACK: DANTE'S INFERNO

Western Canon 1 | Brendan Shea, PhD (Brendan.Shea@rtc.edu)

Dante Alighieri (1265 to 1321) is perhaps the most famous European poet to write during the so-called "Middle Ages" (from around 400 CE to 1500 CE). His work occupies a sort of "middle ground" between the literature and philosophy of the ancient world (Greek and Roman literature and philosophy, the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Christian New Testament) and the modern world which was to come. In his best-known work--the *Divine Comedy*—he gives the reader a complete map of the Christian afterlife, including the *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Heaven). However, as we'll see, Dante's interest here is not exclusively (or even mainly) confined to what happens after death. Instead, the characters that populate these works invite us to reflect on the nature of our *own* world, and the people who live in it.

In this lesson, we'll be learning about Dante's life and background before turning out attention to the *Inferno* section of the *Divine Comedy.* As is the case with all of the authors we've studied, we'll only be skimming the surface.

DANTE'S ITALY

"I say that when she [Beatrice] appeared, in whatever place, by the hope embodied in that marvelous greeting, for me no enemy remained, in fact I shone with a flame of charity that made me grant pardon to whoever had offended me: and if anyone had then asked me anything my reply would only have been: 'Love', with an aspect full of humility."–Dante, Vita Nuova

Dante was born in Florence, Italy to a middle-class family. Florence was something like the cultural-intellectual "heart" of a politically divided Italy, and it would eventually become (in the years just after Dante's death) the birthplace of the Italian "Renaissance." In comparison to many ancient and medieval authors, we actually know a fair amount about Dante's life (in part because he liked to write about his own life!). Since Dante's work is sprinkled with references to contemporary people and places, it's worth noting some highlights:

1. His mother died when he was fairly young, and his father died when he was 18. His family could afford a *decent* education for him (e.g., he learned Latin), but he wasn't fabulously wealthy (and he apparently spent a fair amount of his early years reading popular French poetry as opposed to the "classics"). Dante ended up being one of the first well-known writers who could both write in the "vernacular" (as opposed to Latin) but also reference classic/Latin literature.
2. Dante's family was associated with the "Guelf" faction in Florentine politics, which was both good and bad for Dante. For a short time, he served one of the "priors" of Florence, but was eventually exiled as a result of political turmoil (both between Guelfs and others, and amongst the Guelfs themselves). This faction had traditionally supported the Pope (the only other choice being German princes), but Pope Boniface VII ended up siding with their opponents. Dante was pretty traditionally Christian/Catholic, but definitely had mixed feeling about the Popes (he liked some and deeply disliked others).
3. Dante first saw **Beatrice** (who appears in many of his poems, including the *Divine Comed*y) in 1273 or 1274, when they both were very young, and he instantly fell in love. He apparently only saw her once more before she died in 1290, at age 25. However, her death deeply affected him, and his first major work--**La vita nuova (the "new life")** presents his love for her as a sort of pathway for love of God, of humanity in general. This was a major change from the way that love had been written about by most previous Christian poets (who saw romantic love as an *obstacle* to loving God).
4. Despite his rather metaphysical love for Beatrice, Dante got married in 1285 and had four children before his exile in 1301. When he was exiled, his wife (who was herself from a wealthy/powerful family) and kids didn't join him. (This fact might also explain why he returned to the "Beatrice" theme in these years; he didn't have anyone else!).

THE DIVINE COMEDY: HELL, HEAVEN, AND SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN

THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO THE CITY OF WOES \ THROUGH ME YOU ENTER INTO ENTERNAL PAIN \ THROUGH ME YOU ENTER THE POPULATION OF LOSS…ABANDON ALL HOPE, YOU WHO ENTER HERE. \ These words I saw inscribed in some dark color \ Over a portal. "Master" [Virgil], I said, "make clear \ Their meaning, which I find too hard to gather." \ Then he, as one who understands: "All fear \ Must be left here, and cowardice die." (Inferno, Canto III, Pinsky translation)

Dante is remembered primarily for his *Divine Comedy,* which is a 14,000-line poem written in Italian. In the next section, we'll be talking a bit about why the poem as so important and influential. First, though, some basic facts about the poem:

1. The Comedy is broken into three parts, or **canticles**: *Inferno* (Hell—where the "damned" go for all eternity), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory—where the flawed go to have more time to work on their sins) and *Paradiso* (Paradise—where the people who are "saved" end up). These canticles are in turn, made up of 100 total **cantos** (which form the "sections" of the poem).
2. The poem is a "comedy" in the Aristotelian sense that it ends well (in Heaven!), as opposed to a tragedy (which would end badly). Its structure is clearly based on the **epic poetry** of the Greeks and Romans. In particular, Virgil's **Aeneid**—which provides a Roman-friendly reinterpretation of *Greek* mythology to give a "creation myth" for the Roman Republic and Empire—is a clear influence. Dante sees his project as being somewhat similar: he wants to give a *Christian* worldview that incorporates the insights of the Greeks and Romans. Dante is upfront aout this. In the opening section of the poem, for example, the narrator (who is simply a fictionalized version of Dante) meets Virgil, who agrees to give him a tour of Hell.
3. In the *Inferno,* Dante and Virgil voyage downward through the nine circles of hell. In each circle, the people they meet (and the torments they endure gradually get worse). Some highlights:
    a. The "upper-most" circle of Hell was **Limbo,** which consisted of virtuous pagans (such as the Greek philosophers Socrates and Plato, the Roman poets Ovid and Virgil and the Emperor Julius Caesar, and the Muslim philosopher Avicenna) and unbaptized infants. Limbo isn't terribly unpleasant for these people, other than their having to know what they missed out on. Dante and his fellow Italian Thomas Aquinas helped make "Limbo" a part of mainstream Christian thought (previously, the "Augustinian" view was that these people would simply suffer eternally, whatever their virtues might have been).
    b. In the seventh circle of Hell, Dante enters the "wood of self-murderers", in which people who killed themselves are given the form of trees (since they betrayed their own bodies), and have to have their leaves painfully chewed off by harpies. Suicide was a complex topic for Jewish/Christian/Muslim theologians, not least because it had once been seen as an "honorable" way of refusing to participate in injustice. Dante himself seems to distinguish between suicide done out of emotion (e.g., Dido/Cleopatra are placed in the second circle of Hell, for killing themselves over love), and suicide done as "rational" choice (which is punished more, rather than less, harshly). Dante thus *rejects* the idea that suicide could be honorable.
    c. In another break with "classical" values, Dante, like Virgil before him, self-consciously rejects certain "Greek" values. We thus find **Odysseus (Ulysses)** deep in the eight circle of Hell, being continuously burned alive for his pride, ambition, and trickery (in particular, the bit about the Trojan Horse, along with his getting all his men killed, and his convincing of Achilles to go to war). Even here, though, Dante seems to have mixed feelings, as Ulysses certainly doesn't sound apologetic for his various sins (although this is perhaps part of his problem!).
    d. The lowest circle of Hell is reserved for "betrayers", most notably the three-headed **Lucifer (Satan),** who is frozen from the waist-down in ice. He is chewing on three notable traitors: **Brutus and Cassius** (who assassinated Caesar, and thus betrayed Rome, in Dante's eyes) and **Judas Iscariot** (who betrayed Jesus to the authorities and his eventual execution).
4. When Dante exits Hell at the end of the *Inferno*, he and Virgil enter "purgatory." Between Hell and Purgatory, they meet **Cato the Younger,** who was often held up to be the "model" of pre-Christian Roman virtue (though weirdly enough he, too, committed suicide in order to avoid doing injustice! This suggests that Dante's view toward suicide is more complex than it might seem). In Purgatory, he encounters a variety of people who aren't so much "vicious" as "weak-willed," and who are working to become the sort of people who belong in Paradise. In particular, he encounters who suffer from the "Seven Deadly Sins" of Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Greed, Gluttony, and Lust. These sins are characterized by being "based on" natural/good emotions, but which have been carried on to excess. At the edge of Purgatory (in the "Earthly Paradise), Virgil must leave Dante. In his place, **Beatrice** (more on her later), comes to guide him.
5. In the concentric "spheres" of Paradise, Dante and Beatrice meet people who, are to a greater or lesser degree "good." These range from the "inconstant" and "ambitious" (who did good, but weren't particularly consistent about it) to great rulers like Emperor Constantine. The list of good/heavenly rulers notably include some non-Christians from religion/myth, including the Jewish King David and the Trojan Ripheus, perhaps to emphasize the Dante's belief that "God" appointed secular/political leaders just as much as religious ones. In the outermost spheres, he meets people such as St. Peter and Mary. Outside of the spheres, Dante encounters the tri-partite Christian God.

DANTE'S IMPACT

Dante would go on to change subsequent art in innumerable ways, in part by helping people imagine how things they *thought* were in conflict (romance vs. religion, the mythical vs. the ordinary, faith vs. reason, political vs. religious authority) could actually be reconciled.

Faith and Reason in Harmony. While his interest in combining Greek/Roman literature and philosophy with Christian theology wasn't entirely new, Dante was among the first figures to offer a systematic picture of how these could be incorporated into a systematic, "Christian" worldview based on the idea of *reason.* In philosophy and theology, a similar project motivated Dante's older contemporary **Thomas Aquinas (1225 to 1274),** who was easily the most important European philosopher of the medieval period (and who laid the foundations for modern Catholic doctrine). A generation later, the poet-scholar **Petrarch (1304 to 1374)** would

continue these projects. In some ways, this marks a second "high" point of Italian (and European) thought, not matched since the time of Ovid, Virgil, and Cicero (1,200 years before). While current scholarship tends to disagree with Petrarch's (once highly influential) claim that the era after the fall of Rome was a **"Dark Age",** it's clear that Aquinas-Dante-Petrarch are doing something new/different.

Myth, Religion, and the Ordinary World. Dante's *Divine Comedy* places figures from Greco-Roman mythology, Christian scriptures and writings, ancient history, and his contemporary Italy within the same "world." Some are obviously real (including Dante himself!), some are obviously fictional, and some we aren't sure about. He then uses Christian theology and Greek philosophy (especially the work of Aristotle, who he likely knew about through sources such as Aquinas) to explore what we humans can learn about the "good life" from these various sources. Dante's willingness to learn from anything and everything is an important precursor to what would eventually become known as **Christian Humanism,** which was the idea that Christians can and should be willing to learn from "pagan" literature and philosophy, history, studies of the natural world, etc. This, in turn, would eventually help lay the groundwork for the "Scientific Revolution."

Love on Earth and Heaven. Dante's *Divine Comedy* helped make it acceptable to write "serious" literature in the "vernacular" languages spoken by everyday people (such as Italian, French, or English, rather than classical Latin or Greek). This meant, among other things, that upper- and middle-class women were much more likely to have access to these works (since they often did not read Latin or Greek, the languages of "scholars"). It would take some time, but Latin and Greek would eventually be replaced altogether.

Church or State: Why Not Both? One of Dante's final works was **De Monarchia,** in which he took on the question of who should rule: "secular" authorities (such as the Holy Roman Emperor) or "religious" authorities (in particular, the Pope). Dante argued that both sorts of authorities received their mandate from God, with religious authorities having a "higher" mandate (dedicated to saving people's souls). However, Dante thought Popes can/should let secular authorities rule their domain. In the long run, conflicts of this sort would lead first to Europe's **Protestant Reformation** (which denied the authority of the Pope, with much of his authority/power effectively transferred to political leaders in places like England and Germany), and eventually to the modern notion of a "secular" nation (which arose in in part as a response to the ongoing conflicts between Catholics and Protestants, and a recognition that no religious can/should "rule"). (Not coincidentally, this worked ended up being banned by the Catholic Church in 1585, during the height of the Catholic "Counter-Reformation").

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Suppose that you were an all-powerful being in charge of creating a **cosmology** (basically, a picture of the universe, including any afterlife). Which of the following (from Dante) would you include. Why or why not?
    a. Hell, Limbo, Purgatory, Satan, Heaven/Paradise
    b. Which sorts of people would go in which places?
2. Dante's Paradise Lost presents a world in which there is no conflict between "reason" and (religious) faith. If he were writing *today* (using sources like modern science instead of Greco-Roman philosophy), how might this picture change?
3. Dante presents a sort of hierarchy of sins and virtues, with some being much worse than others (this depends largely on the *reason* people commit the sins, as well as the impact of these sins on society as a whole). If you were writing an "Inferno" for the current world, which sins would you classify as the "worst"? Who might you use as an example?
4. Starting with Petrarch (and going all the way up to the early 20th century), many scholars had the view that the time *between* the fall of Rome and the time of Aquinas/Dante/Petrarch was a "Dark Age," where nothing of much permanent cultural value (in art, science, philosophy, etc.) was produced. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

ACTIVITY: A NEW CIRCLE OF HELL

For this activity, I'd like you to create a "new" circle of Hell or Purgatory, based on the model of Dante's Inferno. Here's what you need to do:

1. Choose a "sin" (way of behaving immorally/badly) as a theme for the circle. You can choose one of the sins that Dante uses, or a new one. Describe this sin. Is it a **mortal sin** (of the sort the person must be punished for *eternally)* or a **venial sin** (i.e., the sort of character flaw that they can "work on" by spending some time in Purgatory)?
2. Describe the "punishment" that you think would be appropriate for this sin. Feel free to be creative (and weird! Dante certainly is.) In Hell, the point is to make the person suffer in a way appropriate to their crime; in Purgatory, it's meant to "improve" them.
3. Describe at least three *inhabitants* of this level. At least one should be fictional and one real/historical. (Remember that they need to be dead!). Describe why they are appropriate for this level of hell.