

**Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)**, Italian poet wrote *La Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy), his allegory of life and God as revealed to a pilgrim, written in *terza rima*; *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise), written between 1307 and 1321.

The dates of when Dante's works were written are inexact and many are unfinished, although there is no doubt that Dante is known as the source of modern Italian. Inspired by Virgil and Aristotle and inspiring other such poets as Geoffrey Chaucer and William Blake, Dante has affected a profound influence on numerous poets, playwrights, and authors right into the 21st century.

Although his exact birth date is not known, Dante Alighieri was born in Florence, Italy in the year 1265. His mother Donna Gabriella degli Abati died when he was very young. His father was Alighiero di Bellincione Alighieri, a notary from a family loyal to the Guelphs. The Guelphs supported the Papacy, while the other predominant family of the neighboring area in Tuscany, the Ghibellines, supported the German emperor, thus spurring many power struggles between the two.

It is said that Dante fought with the Guelphs as a cavalryman in the battle of Campaldino (1289), referred to in *Purgatorio*, which led to the defeat of the Ghibellines. The constitution of the Republic of Florence was reformed and around 1295 it was necessary for Dante to matriculate into the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries in order to be active in government affairs as diplomat and magistrate. However by 1300 the Guelphs were themselves bitterly divided into two factions, *Bianchi* and *Neri*, the Black Guelphs and the White Guelphs. When the Black Guelphs seized power in Florence, all White Guelphs were banished in 1302, including Dante, with the threat of being burned alive if he ever returned.

Dante had married Gemma di Manetto Donati, with whom he had four children; Jacopo, Pietro, Giovanni and Antonia. Gemma remained in Florence after his exile. Years before his marriage it is said that Dante had fallen in love with Beatrice Portinari (d.1290) the young woman in his autobiographical *Vita nuova* (c1293) (The New Life);

*“At that very moment, and I speak the truth, the vital spirit, the one that dwells in the most secret chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that even the most minute veins of my body were strangely affected; and trembling, it spoke these words: Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur michi.”*

Dante traveled throughout Italy, for a time a guest of Malaspina, and there is some evidence that he also visited Paris and England. *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304) (On the Eloquence of Vernacular), though unfinished, is Dante's Latin treatise on and support of the use of the vernacular in poetry. *Convivio* (c1304) (The Banquet) is a philosophical treatise;

*“Since knowledge is the ultimate perfection of our soul, in which resides our ultimate happiness, we are all therefore by nature subject to a desire for it.”* —Canto I

Dante's autobiographical *Inferno* contains one of the most detailed and influential literary descriptions of Hell. Descending into a dark wood where the sun is silent and sinful temptations abound, he is guided by Virgil through the nine circles of Hell, the Gates which read;

*“Through me the way is to the city dolent;  
Through me the way is to eternal dole;  
Through me the way among the people lost.  
Justice incited my sublime Creator;  
Created me divine Omnipotence,  
The highest Wisdom and the primal Love.  
Before me there were no created things,  
Only eterne, and I eternal last.  
All hope abandon, ye who enter in!”* —Canto III

Having survived the torments of Hell Dante and Virgil set out for *Purgatorio*, ascending its mountain and seven terraces representing the Seven Deadly Sins. Beatrice joins him and together they journey through the nine spheres of *Paradiso* which ends;

*“ But my own wings were not enough for this,  
Had it not been that then my mind there smote  
A flash of lightning, wherein came its wish.  
Here vigour failed the lofty fantasy:  
But now was turning my desire and will,  
Even as a wheel that equally is moved,  
The Love which moves the sun and the other stars.”* —Canto XXXIII

*De Monarchia* (On Monarchy) (c1317) is Dante's treatise on the relationship between Church and Empire;

*“It is indeed an arduous task, and one beyond my strength, that I embark on, trusting not so much in my own powers as in the light of that Giver who "giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not”.*—Canto I

Dante Alighieri died when living in the city of Ravenna in central Italy in 1321.

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