

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321)

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) is generally considered the greatest of Italian poets, and also one of the greatest poets that Western civilization has produced. His reputation is primarily based upon his magnum opus *The Divine Comedy*. He was active in politics during the early part of his life and took an active interest in church reform.

Dante was born in Florence, Italy, in 1265. Heir of a poor but noble family, he was one of the seven elected officials in charge of the government of Florence. Civil war was common in Florence at the time and the issues were further complicated by the question of Papal influence. In 1300, Dante along with his fellow magistrates confirmed anti-papal measures. When in 1302, the French prince acting under orders from the Pope captured power in Florence, Dante was sentenced on charges of corruption and opposition to the Church and exiled from Florence on pain of execution by burning if he ever returned. He spent the rest of his life in exile, pining for his native city. He withdrew from active politics to a large extent and concentrated on his literary creations.

His first book was the *Vita Nuova* (The New Life), published in 1294, in which he relates how he fell in love with a young girl Beatrice. Though Beatrice and Dante both married other people, Dante's spiritual love for her persists and she functions as his chief Muse and inspiration. In 1304 or shortly thereafter he published *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, an argument for writing poems and other works in the language that people speak (in his case, Italian) rather than in Latin. At the same time he wrote *Il Convivio* (The Banquet), in which he discusses grammar, and styles of poetry. In 1313 he published *De Monarchia* (On Monarchy) in which he argued that the authority of a secular prince is not derived from the authority of the church, and is not given him by the pope, but comes directly from God.

We do not know exactly when Dante began work on *Divina Commedia*. He had been moving about from court to court after his exile and in 1317 had settled at Ravenna, where he completed his great work. Extant correspondence shows that the first and second parts of *The Divine Comedy*, the "Inferno" and the "Purgatorio" were generally known around 1319. The last part, the "Paradiso" was completed only in 1321. Dante died at Ravenna on 14 September 1321 and the last thirteen Cantos of the "Paradiso" were published posthumously.

The plot of *The Divine Comedy* is straightforward. It begins with Dante lost and walking in a Dark Wood. The poet Virgil then appears as his Guide, sent by the Lady Beatrice to take him through the depths of Hell and up the slopes of Purgatory, to meet her in the country of the Blessed. Dante then follows Virgil, who conducts him through the circles of Hell, where various kinds of evil deeds are punished. They find a small tunnel or pathway cut through the rock that leads them finally out on the other side of the earth, directly opposite Jerusalem, at the foot of Mount Purgatory, which is surrounded by cornices on which the seven basic kinds of inclination to sin are purged

and corrected. They climb the mount and at its summit they find the earthly Paradise, the Eden from which our first parents were expelled. There Beatrice meets Dante, and she conducts him upward through the planetary spheres. Finally, he soars beyond the planets, beyond the stars, and beholds the whole company of Heaven assembled together, and is given a vision of the glory of God Himself. The poem is an allegory of human life and literally sums up the intellectual and theological knowledge of the Middle Ages.

Reference: [The Literature Network](#)