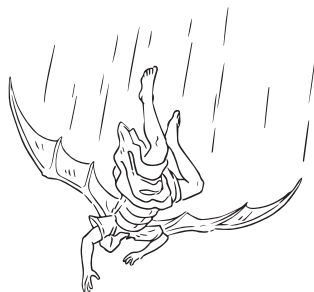


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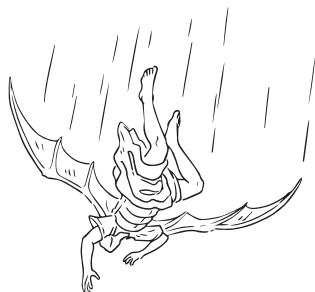


INTRODUCTION

What happens after you die? Is there life after death? Is heaven real? What about hell? If heaven and hell exist, what are they like and who goes there?

These questions arise almost universally. At some point, every person asks them, or a variation of them. And, in the history of literature, many authors have taken their readers on fascinating journeys into the afterlife, venturing to heaven, hell, hades, or other spirit worlds.

And while such stories are numerous, none of them approach the beauty and influence of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*—an epic poem that has stood the test of time, captured imaginations for centuries, and calls the reader to ponder life's (and death's) most important questions.

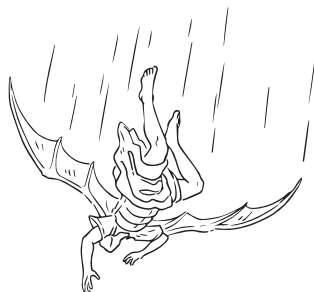


THE WORLD AROUND

Dante was born and lived in Renaissance Italy, during a time of cultural rebirth and change. Florence, Dante's birth city, was the home of numerous poets, artists, and scholars. Additionally, Peter Leithart notes, "In Dante's time, Florence was a large and prosperous city of some 90,000 residents, a center of banking.... More importantly, it was a city split apart by political factions."¹

These "political factions" largely swirled around the role of the Pope in the government, but as many political controversies do, they also involved money and influence. The Guelfs supported the Pope and his claims to political power in Florence, while the Ghibellines held to the Holy Roman Emperor. Dante, following his family line, sided with the Guelfs, who prevailed when Dante was very young.

1. *Ascent to Love* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2001), 46.

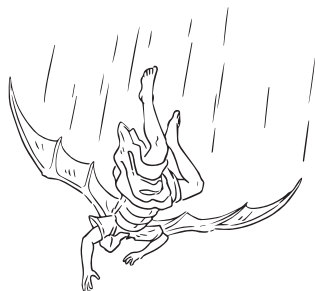


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scholars know next to nothing about the life of Homer, though he authored two of the most influential epic poems in the history of Western civilization (the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*). Similarly, little is known of the life of William Shakespeare, leading some to (wrongly) question his very existence.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), on the other hand, is well known as a person and author—predominantly because his most famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, was largely autobiographical, with Dante as the central protagonist through all three books. As a result, almost any biographical information about Dante intersects with his writing.

Born in Florence, Italy to a family of good standing, Dante's early education was likely given by Franciscan and Dominican monks, and later by Brunetto Latini, a scholar and Guelf statesman. In 1292, Dante began formal study of theology. Dante, then, was well educated in philosophy, theology, and classical literature—developing a particular



CHARACTERS, SETTING, & PLOT SUMMARY

- Dante—the author, narrator, and primary protagonist throughout the poem. *The Divine Comedy* contains some autobiographical elements, as Dante encounters many of his real life friends and enemies.
- Virgil—the author of the *Aeneid*, the epic poem telling of Aeneas’ journey to found Rome after escaping the destruction of Troy with a band of survivors. He is Dante’s guide through the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, though he cannot lead him to Paradise (likely because Virgil is a picture of human reason, which while beneficial, cannot ultimately save him).
- Beatrice—the object of Dante’s real life love and obsession. Dante wrote a collection of thirty-one poems (*Vita Nuova*—“The New Life”) largely to

her, even describing the first time he saw Beatrice, when they were but children. In the *Inferno*, Beatrice has come down from heaven to ask Virgil to lead Dante on this perilous journey from hell to heaven. Dr. Larry Allums notes, “Although they were not intimate at all—she married someone else—he came to regard her as a manifestation of God’s grace and love that he alone could discern.”¹¹

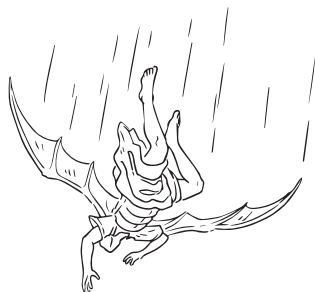
Setting

In the simplest terms, the setting of the *Inferno* is hell, into which Dante and Virgil descend in Canto I and do not emerge from until Canto XXXIV. But, at the very beginning of the poem, Dante finds himself in the “forest dark” (likely a description of his exile from Florence) where he meets Virgil.

The geography of hell is important to the story itself. Hell is divided into circles, with each circle containing similar sinners with a punishment that is intended to meet the crime. The structure of Hell is like a V, an inverted cone, with each circle growing smaller and more constricting as you descend.

Of course, this structure is loaded with imagery and meaning. The movement of the condemned becomes more and more restricted as you move downward, until you finally meet Satan at the very bottom of Hell and he is

11. *Invitation to the Classics*, 98.



WORLDVIEW ANALYSIS

“Therefore I think and judge it for thy best
Thou follow me, and I will be thy guide,
And lead thee hence through the eternal place...”¹²

In Book XI of the *Odyssey*, wandering Odysseus continues recounting his journeys to the Phaiakians, telling them of his journey to Hades, the underworld. There, he reunites with many familiar faces, from Agamemnon to Achilles.

Particularly moving is his reunion with his mother, Antikleia. Odysseus asks her, “Tell me about the wife I married, what she wants, what she is thinking, and whether she stays fast by my son, and guards everything, or if she has married the best man among the Achaians.”¹³ Odys-

12. Quotations are from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s translation of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, first published in 1867.

13. *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (1965; New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 172.

seus longs for news of his wife and home because the goal of his perilous journey is reunion with them.

Aeneas's journey to the underworld (recorded in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*) was endured with the primary purpose of gaining important help from his father, Anchises—a journey which also included a horribly uncomfortable encounter with Dido (the queen of Carthage who committed suicide after being abandoned by Aeneas).

Clearly, Dante's journey into afterlife is not completely original, but it mirrors and differs from the journeys of Odysseus and Aeneas in significant ways. Like Odysseus, Dante is carried through his journey by love. Odysseus was driven by love for his wife Penelope, his son Telemachus, and his home in Ithaka. Dante was driven by his love of Beatrice, her love for him, and Divine love—which proves to be the focus of the entire *Divine Comedy*.

Like Aeneas, Dante encounters numerous souls who are suffering, and he is led by a guide (Aeneas by the Sybil, Dante by Virgil). And, given that Dante's guide in the *Inferno* is Virgil, we can assume these similarities are intentional. Unlike Odysseus and Aeneas, however, Dante's journey is not ultimately aimed at attaining information or help for his journey back home. Rather, Dante's voyage through the afterlife is intended to prepare him to live in the light of Divine love, to prepare him for heaven.

Yet, as Peter Leithart wrote, "Dante will first descend before he can begin to ascend."¹⁴ Unlike Odysseus and

14. *Ascent to Love*, 76.

Aeneas, Dante's journey cannot take him to just one place. In Greco-Roman belief, the afterlife was essentially one place—Hades, or the Underworld, with areas of punishment and reward in close proximity. As a Roman Catholic, Dante believed in Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory (the second section of the *Divine Comedy*)—the place where Christian souls were purified from sin before entering Paradise. Therefore, Dante's journey begins in hell, where the darkness of his soul would lead him if not for heaven's grace purging him from sin.

Virgil & the Virtuous Pagans

For Dante, Virgil was the perfect guide to lead him through Hell and Purgatory. Not only was Virgil a poet hero of Dante's (as seen by his inclusion in the poet band of Canto IV), and the one who recorded *the* defining epic of Italy, he was also a personification of Human Reason, and is numbered among the "Sages" (IV.110).

Yet, because Virgil is a picture of Human Reason, he is unable to guide Dante into Paradise. A far greater guide will be needed for that. Virgil tells Dante of this limitation in I.112-123 (parentheses mine):

"Therefore I think and judge it for thy best
Thou follow me, and I will be thy guide,
And lead thee hence through the eternal place,