Dante Alighieri -
His Life and Works

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence to an old and moderately distinguished family in 1265. Little is known about his early life, but one event from his youth stands out. At the age of nine, Dante attended a May Day party at the home of a gentleman named Folco Portinari. There he met and fell in love with Portinari's daughter, Beatrice, who was a year younger than he. He met Beatrice again nine years later, and it was at this meeting that she first spoke to him. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding developed between them, and before it could be mended, Beatrice – only 24 - died. Dante was heartbroken. Although he eventually married and had children, Beatrice's spirit dominated his emotional and religious life, as well as his literary work, for as long as he lived.

From an early age, Dante wrote poetry and associated himself with the literary people of Florence, but his life was not limited to the pursuit of the arts. His was a time of political turbulence, and Florence was torn by civil war three times during his residence there. He may have participated in the fighting at least once himself. Certainly he became deeply involved in the political life of the city and, as an elected official, sought to end Florence's civil strife, going so far on one occasion as to exile his best friend and some of his wife's relatives because of their part in the conflict. Dante was strongly opposed to the involvement of the Pope and the Church in political conflicts. He favored the renewal of a Roman empire to take care of worldly concerns so that the Church could focus solely on spiritual matters.

In 1301, while Dante was out of Florence on an official mission, the city was seized by his political enemies, and in his absence he was sentenced to die. He never returned to his beloved city but lived the rest of his life in exile. Where he lived and whether he saw his wife and children again after leaving Florence are not known. What is known is that he died in Ravenna in 1321, where he is buried, and during that exile he completed his great poetic achievement, the Divine Comedy, which shows the influence of his political beliefs and experiences.

The Divine Comedy, written between 1308 and 1321, tells of an imaginary journey that takes Dante through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. This journey is symbolic of the spiritual quest for salvation. It involves recognition of sin [the journey through Hell], rejecting sin and awaiting redemption [the time in Purgatory], and finally achieving salvation through faith in divine revelation [seeing the light of God in Paradise]. During his journey, especially through Hell, Dante encounters historical figures from ancient Rome, characters from classical Greek mythology, and political enemies from his own era. Because of the range of people and experiences on which Dante reflects in the Divine Comedy, the work provides a portrait of almost every aspect of medieval human life.

Form, Number, and Symbol. Dante carefully constructed his epic poem in accord with a special scheme of numbers. The poem contains one hundred " cantos," or " chapters," because the number one hundred was regarded in the Middle Ages as the perfect number. The work begins with an introductory canto, and it is then divided equally into three sections of thirty-three cantos each.
The whole poem is composed in "tercets," or three-line stanzas, and uses a rhyme scheme called "terze rima." In this rhyme scheme, the middle line of one tercet rhymes with the first and third lines of the next tercet, giving the poem a strong sense of unity. The number three is important in the Divine Comedy because of its relation to the Christian Trinity, which is the union of three divine figures - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - in one God. The poem is divided into three parts, with the first part, the Inferno, focusing on the power of God the Father, as evidenced in the punishments of the damned. The second part, Purgatorio, focuses on the wisdom of Christ the Son, and the hope for salvation that he offers to those awaiting final judgment. The third part, Paradisio, focuses on the love of the Holy Spirit. In addition, Dante's spiritual journey takes place over three days, beginning in Hell on Good Friday, the day of Christ's crucifixion, and ending symbolically in Paradise three days later on Easter Sunday. Finally, the entire action of the poem takes place under the guidance of three ladies: The Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ who mediates between God and man; Saint Lucia, the patron saint of Dante and of all those without spiritual sight; and Beatrice, Dante's love, who appears to him toward the end of his journey through Purgatory and leads him into Paradise.

The Role of Virgil  For much of his journey through the Inferno and Purgatorio, Dante is guided not by a saint or an angel, but by Virgil, the Roman poet who died nineteen years before the birth of Christ. Virgil explains and instructs, and the clarity of his mind is constantly contrasted with Dante's own confusion. Dante speaks of Virgil with reverence, as if he were talking about a divine figure, calling him "my true master and first author" and "the sole maker from whom I drew the breath..." Yet Dante's Christian beliefs require that Virgil, who had never been baptized, be consigned to the first circle of Hell, along with the other "virtuous pagans" from the classical eras of Greece and Rome. Dante's attitude toward Virgil reflects the split between his strict Christian beliefs and his sympathy for the emerging humanism of the Renaissance. The classical poets Homer, Horace, Ovid, as well as the great philosophers and scientists of the pre-Christian age, are all in Hell, yet Dante feels honored when they call him one of their own. "I glory in the glory I have seen," he exults. Virgil is the perfect guide for the early part of the journey because, for Dante, he is the ultimate symbol of what human reason can achieve without faith. Reason uses logic and facts to arrive at the truth. However, Dante saw a reason as limited; it is only through faith the Dante can grasp the truth of Paradise.

Beatrice - Dante's spiritual Guide Beatrice is Dante's symbol of love and faith. She sends Virgil to guide Dante through Hell and Purgatory. It is she alone who can guide Dante toward salvation and Paradise. The entire journey, blessed throughout by the love of Beatrice, is expected to turn Dante forever from error. It is a journey toward truth and grace, made possible by the love of a woman who first gave Dante a glimpse of spiritual perfection.

Style and Language  Dante's epic poem avoids the lofty language generally used in important works, especially literary epics and tragedies. This, along with the fact that the epic has a happy ending, was one of the reasons Dante called his poem a divine "comedy." Dante's language is sparse, direct, and idiomatic, much like the ordinary speech of his time. But the style of the Divine Comedy is so perfectly modulated that it is regarded as the fines poetry ever written in Italian. It was a stroke of genius to use everyday language, or the vernacular, in a poem of such encyclopedic proportions. The work ranges widely across all levels of imagination and reality. It deals with the mythological, the legendary, the historical, the political, the religious, and the intensely personal. Indeed, the Divine Comedy encompasses Dante's vision of God's judgment on every significant aspect of human life.