

Dante Notes

- Born in Florence in 1265, died in 1321
- Passed his remaining 20 years in exile, banished forever from his city on the grounds of fraudulent use of public money, a charge trumped up by his political enemies
- Commitment to causes, to civic life, to study, to literature - political life began at the age of 30 (in 1295) and five years after Beatrice died
- His keen interest in the contemporary world, his desire to identify himself with his times, and his fascination for the immediacy of any situation - the very symbol of Italian independence. Wished to see Italy united a return to order.
- The Holy Roman Empire alone, Dante believed, as the legitimate heir of Rome, could provide the conditions of justice and order necessary for the pursuit of happiness in this world, and ensure the right conditions in which the Church might pursue its task of leading man to the achievement of his other legitimate goal, eternal happiness.
- **Pope Boniface VIII** - made him mad by sentencing to exile some of the leaders of the two opposing factions of the ruling Guelf party.
 - Epitome of corrupt spiritual leadership
- AND to oppose the Pope's request to subsidize the armies of the Pope's ally Charles II of Naples, or send soldiers to swell the ranks of the papal forces.

Epic - the term epic refers to a quality the poem creates that it is in some way exploring or celebrating something much larger than the particular characters and places it describes: it is bringing before us, to put the matter very simply, a world view, a sense of cultural completeness, so that as we move through the work, we experience the exploration of some big questions about individual and social purpose, about a system of belief, often about the past traditions and future prospects, about the major things which we use to define a culture. The breadth of the epic brings before us a comprehensive picture of an entire culture in a way that an ordinary narrative, no matter how exciting, does not.

The Divine Comedy (Comedy? Begins badly in Hell and ends well in Paradise) - is a poem of love: if religion and politics, civic life, literature and philosophy are important themes in the work, they are constantly developed and measured against the parameters of love

Is the account of a man in love, who journeys beyond the grave to meet once more his lady snatched away by death some ten years before AND finds the fullest satisfaction of that love in the vision of GOD

DC - its preeminent characteristics are justice and order. Dante was a realist. The DC predicate the authority of human reason in all man's activities: human rationality, that is, enlightened to a greater or lesser extent by wisdom. The source of that wisdom for mankind is firstly rational philosophy, which with the 'natural light' of the moral conscience illumines the paths to right living (virtue) and secondly theology, which arrives at the deepest truth by the revelation or 'divine light' of the holy scripture.

DC conforms closely to the aesthetics and ethos of the medieval period, but which transcends 'medievalness' in one significant way:

Allegory and vision are its major medieval characteristics

Literal - more modern - the work's literal subject is 'the state of souls after death'

Allegorical - is 'man as deserving the reward or punishment of justice, according to his merits or demerits in the exercise of his free will'

(**didactic** nature of the work; by observing the fate of souls in the afterlife, the reader may deduce the standard of justice by which man's free choices and consequent action in this life should be assessed.)

Dante's journey is not only the story of his conversion from sin to grace, but the progress too of the soul of Everyman

Inferno = eternal realm of the damned. The city of man which had become utterly corrupt, where justice and order, fair-dealings and compassion have been totally subverted by loose-living, violence, fraud and treachery. Are largely crimes that would be condemned in any rational society.

Purgatory = where literally the should of penitent sinners are purged of their tendencies to sin, and the wounds in the psyche caused by sin are healed. Allegorically a representation of an imperfect but well-disposed society struggling upwards under the discipline of secular and spiritual law towards the goal of a just society.

Paradise = ideal society is symbolized by Eden. Dante, entering Eden, is both himself and Everyman, with restored primal innocence, fitted to repossess a perfect earthly society of justice and order where the prescription of law are superfluous. It is in this Earthly Paradise, appropriately, that Dante loses Virgil and meets Beatrice once more, and from here he rises with her into Paradise, to learn the deeper truth that subtend man's relationship with the world and with God. The state of blessed souls in the eternal presence of God is an allegorical picture of the perfect life of intellectual activity and contemplation, worship, prayer and speculation in a renewed earthly society.

Rhyme scheme = terza rima (aba bcb cdc ded, etc.)

INFERNO

- Opens in a forest with no precise topographical location; it is dark and confusing, and Dante has lost his path within it. The forest, then, represents error, Dante' own, but also that of Everyman. It may also represent Florence in 1300 or Christian Europe, in which the citizen wanders bereft of sound leadership and government
- VIRGIL = voice of philosophical wisdom or reason → he will then hand over his task to BEATRICE, who as divine wisdom, the light of theology, can show Dante the nature of the highest good.
- Dante's uncompromising attitude with regard to moral priorities is reflected in his conception of hell.
- **Ante-hell** - which has no precedent in either Christian or classical conceptions of the infernal realm. This region lies outside the confines of hell proper; it is a sort of no-mans-land to which the luke-warm in this life are relegated = the sitters-on-the-fence. They were not worthy of hell and even less of heaven.