

Dante's *Divine Comedy* - Points to Remember

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), born in Florence, Italy, spent most of his adult life in exile from his beloved city due to political turmoil. His *Commedia* (the *Divina* was added after his death) was written during this exile.

The form of Dante's poem is brilliantly crafted in its intentional use of rhyme and number, but most significantly in its use of the **vernacular**— the everyday Italian (*not* Latin) of the people in the street. It is as if he makes the clear statement that this poem is not about some abstract or idealized or artistic world (even though its setting is hell, purgatory, and heaven), it is about *our* experience of *this* world.

Thus, the true significance of Dante's work is not as some sort of supplement to a Biblical picture of the afterlife (Dante's geography of hell, etc. is pure imagination, as he himself would admit), but rather presents a profound picture of the psychology of sin and salvation.

Dante's life was shaped by his Christian faith and the dominant worldview of his late medieval Florentine culture, but also by a very personal experience: his vision of Beatrice, a local woman, as a symbol of divine love. It is this preoccupation with love, at its noblest and purest, that marks the *Divine Comedy*.

As critic Larry Allums put it,

“The single unified theme of the entire *Comedy* is love, or *amor*. God is love, and every aspect of creation, especially humanity, is infused with this divine attribute. According to Dante, people cannot live without loving; because they have free will, however, they may choose to love the wrong object or to love the right object too much or too little. In the very middle of his poem, on Mount Purgatory, Dante has Virgil speak at length on this truth of life's drama: the arduous search to love the right things in the right way. Thus Dante the pilgrim journeys toward a full understanding of the love in which God intends for him to live and find joy, not only in this life but in the next. He must come to see his love for Beatrice as an imperfect reflection of the abundant love to be found in God's will.

Each main section of the poem portrays a different stage in the human understanding of God's love: the *Inferno* reveals the most horrid consequences of love perverted or defective; the *Purgatorio* depicts flawed souls actively seeking perfection in love; and the *Paradiso* shows the absolute happiness of perfect love achieved. As Dante moves through the three realms— observing, acting, suffering, and learning— the drama of his own salvation unfolds. Because he is alive he is an alien in the strange landscape, but he steadily gains the needed maturity in love to return to the fallen world.”

<http://www.novelguide.com/divinecomedy/toptenquotes.html>

Dante's *Divine Comedy* -Top Ten Quotes

1) “‘And are you Virgil, you the fountain that freely pours so rich a stream of speech?’ I answered him with shame upon my brow. ‘O light and honor of all other poets, may my long study and the intense love that made me search your volume serve me now. You are my master and my author, you—the only one from whom my writing drew the noble style for which I have been honored...’”
[Dante's first words to Virgil upon meeting him in the dark wood before their journey into Hell. Canto I, *Inferno*]

2) “And when, with gladness in his face, he placed his hand upon my own, to comfort me, he drew me in among the hidden things. Here sighs and lamentations and loud cries were echoing across the starless air, so that, as soon as I set out, I wept. Strange utterances, horrible pronouncements, accents of anger, words of suffering, and voices shrill and faint, and beating hands—all went to make tumult that will whirl forever through that turbid, timeless air, like sand that eddies when a whirlwind swirls.” [Dante, as he enters the Gates of Hell. Canto III, *Inferno*]

3) “Their hands were tied behind by serpents; these had thrust their head and tail right through the loins, and then were knotted on the other side. And—there!—a serpent sprang with force at one who stood upon our shore, transfixing him just where the neck and shoulders form a knot. No *o* or *i* has ever been transcribed so quickly as that soul caught fire and burned and, as he fell, completely turned to ashes; and when he lay, undone, upon the ground, the dust of him collected by itself and instantly returned to what it was...” [Dante’s descriptive account of the eternal punishment served by thieves in the Eighth Circle of Hell. Canto XXIV, *Inferno*]

4) “The emperor of the despondent kingdom so towered—from midchest—above the ice, that I match better with a giant’s height than giants match the measure of his arms; now you can gauge the size of all of him if it is in proportion to such limbs. If he was once as handsome as he now is ugly and, despite that, raised his brows against his Maker, one can understand how every sorrow has its source in him! I marveled when I saw that, on his head, he had three faces: one—in front—blood red; and then another two that, just above the midpoint of each shoulder, joined the first...” [Dante’s first impression of Satan. Canto XXXIV, *Inferno*]

5) “I threw myself devoutly at his holy feet, asking him to open out of mercy; but first I beat three times upon my breast. Upon my forehead, he traced seven *P*’s with his sword’s point and said: ‘When you have entered within, take care to wash away these wounds.’ Ashes, or dry earth that has just been quarried, would share one color with his robe, and from beneath that robe he drew two keys; the one was made of gold, the other was of silver; first with the white, then with the yellow key, he plied the gate so as to satisfy me.” [The angel guarding the gates of Purgatory prepares Dante for his journey and opens the gates to the mountain of Purgatory. Canto IX, *Purgatorio*]

6) “My son, you’ve seen the temporary fire and the eternal fire; you have reached the place past which my powers cannot see. I’ve brought you here through intellect and art; from now on, let your pleasure be your guide; you’re past the steep and past the narrow paths. Look at the sun that shines upon your brow; look at the grasses, flowers, and the shrubs born here, spontaneously, of the earth. Among them, you can rest or walk until the coming of the glad and lovely eyes—those eyes that, weeping, sent me to your side. Await no further word or sign from me: your will is free, erect, and whole—to act against that will would be to err: therefore I crown and miter you over yourself.” [Virgil’s last words to Dante as he gives Dante the power to guide himself. Canto XXVII, *Purgatorio*]

7) “‘Turn, Beatrice, o turn your holy eyes upon your faithful one,’ their song beseeched, ‘who, that he might see you, has come so far. Out of your grace, do us this grace; unveil your lips to him, so that he may discern the second beauty you have kept concealed.’ O splendor of eternal living light, who’s ever grown so pale beneath Parnassus’ shade or has drunk so deeply from its fountain, that he’d not seem to have his mind confounded, trying to render you as you appeared where heaven’s harmony was your pale likeness—your face, seen through the air, unveiled completely?” [The angels in the Earthly Paradise ask Beatrice to show her face to Dante. Dante’s response. Canto XXXI, *Purgatorio*]

8) “O lady, you in whom my hope gains strength, you who, for my salvation, have allowed your footsteps to be left in Hell, in all the things that I have seen, I recognize the grace and benefit that I, depending upon your power and goodness, have received. You drew me out from slavery to freedom by all those paths, by all those means that were within your power. Do, in me, preserve your generosity, so that my soul, which you have healed, when it is set loose from my body, be a soul that you will welcome.” [Dante, thanking Beatrice for saving him. Canto XXXI, *Paradiso*]

9) “O grace abounding, through which I presumed to set my eyes on the Eternal Light so long that I spent all my sight on it! In its profundity I saw—ingathered and bound by love into one single volume what, in the universe, seems separate, scattered: substances, accidents, and dispositions as if conjoined—in such a way that what I tell is only rudimentary.” [Dante, on his vision of God. Canto XXXIII, *Paradiso*]

10) “But then my mind was struck by light that flashed and, with this light, received what it had asked. Here force failed my high fantasy; but my desire and will were moved already—like a wheel revolving uniformly—by the Love that moes the sun and the other stars.” [Dante’s conclusion of *The Divine Comedy*. Canto XXXIII, *Paradiso*]