

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Tera Reid-Olds, PhD

Dante Alighieri (1265 – 1321)

LIFE

Dante was born in Florence to a minor noble family and grew up in the midst of the conflict between two political factions, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. From the 12th century to the 14th century, these rival factions - representing the competing interests of the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor respectively - clashed throughout the city-states of North and Central Italy, and Dante's oeuvre gives us insight into the political turmoil of Florence during this time. Much of what we know of Dante's early life is revealed in his autobiographical work, *The New Life* (1293), which recounts his first meeting with Beatrice Portinari at the age of nine. He idealized and loved Beatrice from afar for the rest of his life, a devotion that is reflected in much of his poetry. We know less about his wife, Gemma Donati, whom he married in 1285 and with whom he had four children (three sons and a daughter). Their life together remains largely undocumented, as Dante does not refer to Gemma explicitly in his literary works.

Dante's family was affiliated with the Guelphs and the poet fought in one of the Guelph-Ghibelline conflicts, the Battle of Campaldino, in 1289. The result of the battle was a Guelph victory that secured the power of this faction in Florence. Dante benefited from his affiliation with the Guelphs and he remained politically active. In 1295, he enrolled in the Guild of Physicians and Apothecaries and in 1300, he was elected to serve as one of six councilors, governing the city of Florence. But his influence waned as a result of political fragmentation within the Guelph party, which had splintered into two sub-factions, White and Black. Dante's family was aligned with the White Guelphs, who objected to the intervention of Pope Boniface VIII in Florentine politics.

In 1302, while Dante was visiting the pope in Rome as part of a Florentine delegation, the Black Guelphs seized power in the city. Dante and many of his political allies were sent into exile. The terms of Dante's exile initially forbade him from returning to Florence for two years and required him to pay a fine upon his return. With all of his assets seized and believing himself to be innocent, Dante refused to pay the fine and remained in exile for the rest of his life. Much of his most famous writing comes out of this period of exile. For example, his unfinished collection of essays, *On Eloquence in the Vernacular* is believed to have been composed between 1304-1307. In this collection, Dante advocates for writing literature in the vernacular as opposed to the more traditional Latin.

Dante's *Divine Comedy*, widely considered his most influential work and completed in 1320, referenced many significant people in the author's life, including his muse Beatrice, his philosophical and literary mentors, and his political allies and enemies. In addition to providing commentary on Florentine politics and society, Dante reflected on his own exile in the context of his Christian faith, blending personal experience and religious beliefs in his exploration of spiritual exile from God. In the third book of the *Comedy*, *Paradise*, Dante expressed his wish to be invited back to Florence. Unfortunately, the poet did not live to see this nor did he ever return home during his lifetime. Dante died in the city of Ravenna at the age of 56, one year after the *Comedy* was completed (1321). Only in June 2008 was the author posthumously pardoned by the city council of Florence.

LEGACY

Dante is considered one of the "three crowns" of Italian literature, alongside his contemporaries Petrarch (1304-1374) and Boccaccio (1313-1375). He is often referred to as the Supreme Poet and the father of Italian language due to his use of the vernacular (Tuscan Italian) in writing. This may be Dante's most significant legacy: he published the majority of his work in Italian with the express purpose of reaching a broader audience and, in doing so, he influenced other writers to

do the same. It is often said that Standard Italian can be traced back to Dante's codification of the language in *The Divine Comedy* and *The New Life*.

Dante's legacy also encompasses the literary styles, concepts, and rhyming forms he popularized in his work: (1) the "sweet new style" of his love poetry, focusing on the idealization of Beatrice in religious terms; (2) the topic of courtly love, which Dante did not invent but helped to popularize through his writing; and (3) the three-line rhyming verse form which he created and employed in *The Divine Comedy*.

WORKS

Note: An exact publication date is unknown for many of Dante's works.

Stony Rhymes (Rime petrose), 1290 - 1300

The New Life (La Vita Nuova), 1293 - 1294

On Eloquence in the Vernacular (De vulgari eloquentia), 1302 - 1307, unfinished

The Banquet (Convivio), 1304 - 1307, unfinished

On Monarchy (De Monarchia), 1312-1313

The Divine Comedy (La Divina Commedia), 1320

Eclogues (Eclogae), 1319-1320

A Question of the Water and of the Land (Quaestio de aqua et terra), 1320

THEMES

LOVE

Introduction One of the most prominent themes in Dante's work is love. His lifelong devotion to Beatrice Portinari is his inspiration for reflections on romantic love, while his Christian worldview informs his understanding of God's love. Exploring the nuances of this concept in *The New Life* and *The Divine Comedy*, Dante reflects on the transformative power of love and on love as a form of salvation.

The New Life This collection of verse recounts the history of Dante's love for Beatrice Portinari. Dante separates his life into two periods: the time before he met Beatrice (from birth to age eight) and the time after he met Beatrice. The title of this work refers to Dante's "new life" now that he has experienced love for the first time, inspired by this initial sighting of Beatrice. Each encounter he has with her is documented in this book, beginning with the first time he sees her in church at age nine and ending with her death rites. Many of their meetings are described as one-sided observations on his part. For example, he sees Beatrice at a wedding and on the streets of Florence, but does not approach her, instead choosing to "address" her through anonymous poetry. Often, there is very little direct interaction between the two.

Unrequited love is a common theme in courtly love stories, often illustrated in medieval stories in terms of a knight's devotion from afar to a noble, but inaccessible, lady. Dante's love for Beatrice is an example of this; although he is not a knight, his poetry resonates with and helps to codify this aspect of courtly love convention.

Another characteristic of this conception of love is introspection, another prominent theme in *The New Life*. Dante's introspection encompasses his feelings for Beatrice and his beliefs about the power of love: it transforms a person, for better *and* for worse. For Dante, "better" comes in the form of poetic inspiration, while "worse" describes his physical illness and depression.

The Divine Comedy In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's love for Beatrice is implicit in his decision to depict her as an angelic figure and guide, residing in the uppermost sphere of Heaven. The representation of love in this poem reflects a medieval Christian perspective. The plot follows the pilgrim Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, culminating in a transcendent encounter with God. The divine love of God infuses Dante's Heaven in the *Paradiso*, and it is the reason that every soul is perfect and content within its designated celestial sphere. God's sacrifice for humanity – a sacrifice made out of love – through Jesus Christ's crucifixion and

resurrection is referenced throughout the poem. The survival of Dante the pilgrim is ensured by those who love him: first, Beatrice, who descended from Heaven to solicit Virgil's help in protecting Dante on his journey, and second, Virgil himself, who mentors the poet through Hell and Purgatory.

POLITICS

Introduction The tension between papal authority and secular government was a significant source of conflict in medieval Italy. Florentine politics – the Guelph-Ghibelline conflict, the fragmentation of the Guelph party, the influence of the Pope, and the author's own exile – are central to Dante's philosophical treatises and poetry. Post-1302, while living in exile, his work becomes increasingly political as he grapples with the White Guelphs' loss of power. In his essay, *On Monarchy*, Dante imagines world peace made possible through a universal monarchy and expands on his political commentary in another unfinished philosophical work, *The Banquet*. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante explicitly engages with his political rivals and allies as part of his journey through the afterlife.

The Divine Comedy *The Divine Comedy* is set in 1300 but was published shortly before the author's death in 1321, allowing Dante to predict his own future within the poem. In doing so, he primarily focuses on his impending political exile in 1302 and emphasizes the unjust circumstances of that exile. Dante exchanges news of current events with several of his contemporaries in the poem, providing the reader with insight into medieval Florentine society and politics. This is an opportunity for the author to exercise his judgment and his political biases inform where his allies and enemies end up within Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. He takes the opportunity to condemn those he views as corrupt, delivering a scathing indictment of popes and clergymen in the eighth circle of the *Inferno*. This is a significant moment within *The Divine Comedy*, as Dante does not often pass explicit judgment on those he encounters. The fact that he chooses to single out fraudulent religious leaders reflects his affiliation as a White Guelph, opposed to the Pope's influence on Florentine politics.

LANGUAGE

Introduction Language is the foundation of Dante's legacy as a writer. He chose to write in the vernacular language "of the people" (Tuscan Italian) rather than the learned language of the political, religious and social elite (Latin). In his unfinished work, *On Eloquence in the Vernacular*, Dante studies the historical evolution of language in Europe and argues for the rhetorical value of the vernacular, or common language, in writing. He cites genres of literature that lend themselves to the use of the vernacular and in doing so, provides his justification for writing in Italian. Beyond Dante's choice to write *The New Life* and *The Divine Comedy* in Italian, language as a mode of communication and a source of power are significant themes in his works.

The New Life In *The New Life*, it is important to extend our definition of language beyond what is spoken or written to non-verbal modes of communication, too. As Dante has little direct contact with Beatrice, he is attuned to her body language: her gaze and her recognition (or lack thereof) in public. He responds to her in writing but is committed to preserving her honor and reputation. For this reason, he is cautious in the composition of his poetry to preserve her anonymity: he dedicates poetry to other women or a general audience to deflect suspicion. Dante's concern over the danger that careless language poses to one's social standing proves to be somewhat justified. When rumors spread about his scandalous liaison with another woman, Beatrice responds by refusing to acknowledge Dante. What people say matters, whether the allegations are true or not. Later, Dante makes a scene at a wedding, growing faint at the sight of Beatrice. He imagines that her companions are mocking his odd behavior and is desperate to justify himself to her.

The Divine Comedy At the conclusion of *The New Life*, Dante declares that he will no longer write love poetry about Beatrice and he hints at a more worthy way to honor the lady after her death. This honor comes in the form of *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante elevates Beatrice to an angelic figure. In doing so, he immortalizes her, preserving his memory of her in his work. Dante

sees his influence and power as tied to language and his ability to write. For example, he chooses the famous Roman poet Virgil to be his guide throughout most of *The Divine Comedy* because he sees a kinship between them and intends his own work to be considered alongside the classical epics of Greece and Rome. Dante saw his historical legacy as connected to his literary prowess (and he was right). He also expressed the hope – in the *Paradiso* – that his writing might persuade those in power to pardon him from exile.

RELIGION

Introduction For Dante, religion is related to themes of love, politics, and language. The crux of the political conflicts in medieval Florence is the influence of the papacy in city state governance. Dante's *The Divine Comedy* is an allegorical journey through the afterlife, informed by the author's Catholic faith and religious upbringing. As such, any fictionalized encounter between Dante and his contemporaries on the subject of Florentine politics in the *Divine Comedy* is contextualized within Christian constructs of life and death. Religion is also integral to Dante's treatment of love. In both *The New Life* and *The Divine Comedy*, Dante's love for Beatrice is worshipful: he describes her as an angelic figure and links her beauty to virtue and divinity. He prays to her for intercession and sympathy, just as he prays to Love (personified) and God. In both works, Dante emphasizes his effort – as a poet – to illustrate the divine through language, whether that be a sublime encounter with God or the perfect virtue of Beatrice Portinari.

The New Life Throughout this collection of verse, Dante personifies Love as a young nobleman who visits him in visions and appears in several poems. He often prays to Love as one might pray to God, invoking religious themes in his treatment of love as part of the human experience. Religion is also central to Dante's idealization of Beatrice as a paragon of feminine virtue, which is a characteristic of courtly love as a medieval concept. Dante never expresses a physical desire for Beatrice, but focuses on her purity, divinity and innate goodness. He refers to her as an angel repeatedly, and recounts what he has heard others say about her: that she is not a human woman, but a miracle. His language becomes more explicitly religious when he dwells on her impending death in the latter half of the book. Dante has a vision – or premonition – of Beatrice's death in which the ground shakes, the sky darkens, and angels sing. This revelatory response of the universe is reminiscent of biblical descriptions of Jesus Christ's resurrection. After Beatrice's death comes to pass, Dante writes several poems describing her ascension to Heaven; the fact that she dwells among the angels is framed as a consolation to those who are left behind.

The Divine Comedy *The Divine Comedy* is a medieval Christian allegory, exploring the nature of the soul and revealing Dante's understanding of the afterlife according to Catholic doctrine: the existence of Limbo, Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. Sins and virtues are defined in terms of a Christian worldview and individuals are punished accordingly. The belief in intercession as a means of helping a soul ascend to Heaven is present throughout the text, not only in Dante's encounters with Florentine contemporaries (some of whom request remembrance or prayers on their behalf) but also his visions of biblical figures Mary and Jesus (both of whom intercede on behalf of Christian souls). The function of the clergy is heavily scrutinized in the author's work, in part due to the role of priests as intermediaries on behalf of the faithful. Much of Dante's social and political critique in *The Divine Comedy* is directed towards corrupt religious figures who, he believes, should be held to a higher standard as representatives of the Church. As a result, Dante has no sympathy for those individuals when he encounters them in the *Inferno*.

CHARACTERS

Dante

Dante infused much of his poetry and prose with autobiography, which is reflected in his characterization (in some cases, fictionalization) of historical figures in *The New Life* and *The Divine Comedy*. Both works are highly introspective, which gives us insight into Dante as both character and author. In *The New Life* he presents himself as a servant of Love, devoted to the beautiful and virtuous Beatrice. Whenever he believes his reputation is in danger of alienating him from Beatrice, Dante is quick to defend himself through poetry, justifying his behavior and linking

his actions back to the purity of his love for her. He was a well-known author, frequently solicited by noble men and women to write poetry on their behalf.

In *The Divine Comedy*, his reputation as a writer is further enhanced by his association with classical authors such as Virgil. In this work, he also exercises the right to defend himself in response to his political rivals and detractors through brief exchanges with the familiar souls he encounters in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise. Those he does not directly engage with he implicitly passes judgment on, by pointing out the individuals to his readers as the journey progresses. The end result is a view of Dante as someone who is insightful, steadfast, virtuous, and unfairly maligned by those who sent him into exile.

Beatrice

Dante's virtue, however, pales in comparison to that of Beatrice. Dante is, after all, still a human with all the capacity for human foibles. Beatrice, by contrast, is given very little nuance in Dante's writing. She is consistently represented in his poetry and prose as an unattainable and perfect figure, the embodiment of an angel on earth who wields power over those who love her. In *The Divine Comedy* she takes a more proactive and central role in the story (as opposed to *The New Life*, where she has virtually no direct interaction with Dante). Once he reaches Paradise, she serves as his mentor and guide, asking him questions and challenging him to open his mind in order to grasp what he encounters in Heaven. Still, her function – like Virgil's – is to facilitate Dante's growth as the protagonist of the story. It may be fairer to look at "Beatrice" not as a representation of Beatrice Portinari, the historical woman, but as Dante's ideal.