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Introductory Lecture 1

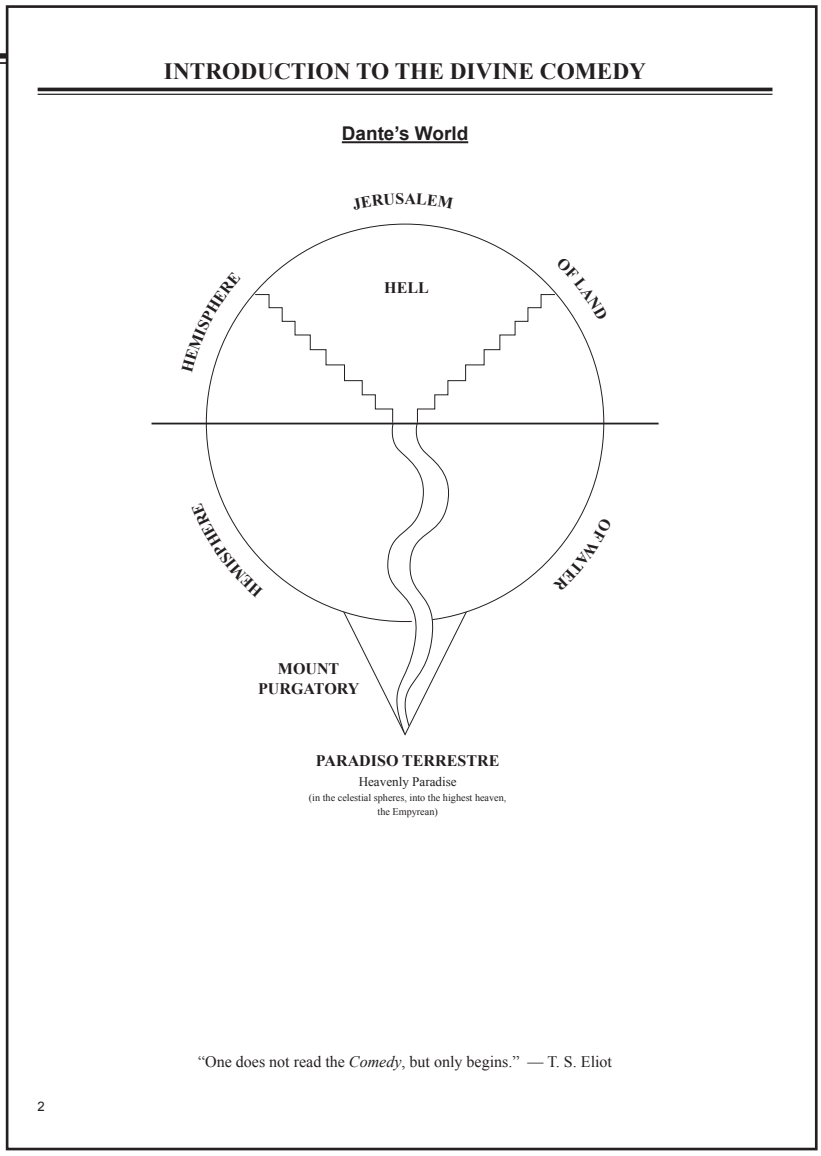
THE AUTHOR

Full name: **Dante Alighieri**
Lived: **1265-1321**
Birthplace: **Florence**
Family: Around the age of 20, he married Gemma Donati. They had three children.

TYPE OF LITERATURE: ALLEGORY

An allegory is a narrative in which things have symbolic meaning. It is an extended metaphor. A metaphor, unlike a simile, sets up a comparison *without* the use of "like" or "as." For example: "The sun rose, a glorious king striding into his throne room." In this sentence, the sun is being compared to a king, but it does not say the sun is *like* a king. The sun is simply described as if it *were* a king. Dante's allegory is relatively complex. **It differs from the standard type of allegory in two ways:**

1) It is true in its literal meaning. While most allegories create fictitious characters and events to illustrate a true message, Dante's story, not just his moral, is intended to be true. Thus, the setting of his story is the real environment of Hell, Heaven, and Purgatory. He is not claiming to describe them as they actually are, but he portrays them in accordance with his Catholic beliefs about the reality of these eternal states. (See the Student Guide p. 2 for a portrayal of Dante's World.)



2) The figures of the allegory are not personified abstractions but symbolic personages. In order to distinguish between personified abstractions and symbolic personages, it is first important to understand the difference between a conventional symbol and a natural symbol. A conventional symbol is a sign arbitrarily chosen to represent something else, like *x* in algebra. A natural symbol is something that naturally suggests something because of its inherent characteristics. Most allegories use personified abstractions, which are simply abstract concepts like Hope, Desire, or Christian (*Pilgrim's Progress*) that are given human forms and characteristics. Dante's allegory uses symbolic personages. These are real people who serve as natural symbols, because their very natures qualify them to represent a particular virtue or vice. **Thus, in Dante, unlike *Pilgrim's Progress*, you do not find Reason leading his friend Sinner and meeting a man named Glutton, but rather you have Virgil leading Dante and meeting Ciacco.**

What is the problem for us with Dante's use of symbolic personages? Merely that for us they do not serve as "*natural* symbols" because we don't know the people he's talking about. When he mentions Ciacco, it means nothing to us, whereas Dante's contemporaries would have immediately recognized

CHRONOLOGY

The whole of the *Divine Comedy* takes place during Easter week in the year 1300. It is on the night of Maundy Thursday that Dante finds himself lost in the Dark Wood, and after spending a day vainly trying to climb the Mountain, it is on Good Friday that he meets Virgil and begins his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. By the evening of Holy Saturday, the poets have reached the bottom of Hell at the dead center of the earth. In the next 24 hours, they climb the long tunnel which brings them to the surface again, at the foot of Mount Purgatory on the other side of the globe. They surface exactly as the sun is rising on Easter Sunday morning. This time frame coincides exactly with Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, so that the journeying soul "dies to sin" and is "buried with Christ" on Good Friday evening and then "rises with Him" in the dawn of Easter.

Dante spends the following three days and three nights ascending Mount Purgatory and passes six hours in the earthly Paradise at its peak. At noon on the Wednesday after Easter, he is taken up into the Heavenly Paradise and begins to rise through the ten spheres. At sunset on Thursday, he finally reaches the Empyrean (the highest heaven of fire in ancient cosmology and the abode of God), and the visionary journey ends.

Maundy Thursday (night).....Dante finds himself lost in the Dark Wood.
Good Friday (evening) .....Dante meets Virgil and begins his trek through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven.
Saturday (evening) .....The poets have reached the bottom of Hell.
Sunday (dawn) .....The poets resurface on the opposite side of the globe, at the foot of Mount Purgatory.
Sunday-Wednesday.....Dante ascends Mount Purgatory and passes 6 hours in the earthly Paradise at its peak.
Wednesday (noon) .....Dante is taken up into the Heavenly Paradise, and rises successively through the ten spheres.
Thursday (sunset) .....Dante reaches the height of the Empyrean.

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him as the rich Florentine gentleman who was notorious for his gluttony. So, this is where much of our homework comes in. There is no need to press the historical details too far, but we will not know what Dante's characters stood for in his eyes unless we know who they were.

The main allegory of the *Divine Comedy* is the soul's search for God. Dante bases the storyline on two popular types of stories: 1) the story of a vision of the afterworld - Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory and 2) the story of a lover who has to go through the Underworld to find his lost lady.

CHRONOLOGY

Go over the Chronology of the *Divine Comedy* with the students, outlined on p. 3 of the Student Guide. Students are responsible to know that **the *Comedy* takes place during Easter Week of 1300**.

Teacher Notes

The first six pages of the Student Guide provide introductory material to introduce the students to the *Comedy*. This is to be fleshed out with the Lecture material given and can be spread over a couple of lessons. It is best to write the Lecture up on the board or present it on an overhead or power point, to ensure that the students get the information down correctly and thoroughly.

At the end of the lecture, go back and have the students mark or highlight the bolded material in their notes. This is the material they will be responsible to know for Drill Questions, Quizzes, and Tests. This would be a good opportunity to explain course expectations.

COURSE EXPECTATIONS

At least every other lesson will begin with **Drill Questions**, which are located at the back of the Student Guide (pp. 118-121). Any and all of these are game for Drill beginning the class after the material is covered. For example, Drill Questions #1-11 (leaving out #5) and #15 were covered in Lecture 1, and could be asked at the beginning of the following lesson. **Quizzes** will be given approximately every two lessons and will assess whether the student has been faithfully reading the cantos. There will be two tests for each section of the *Comedy*, a **Midterm**, and a **Final**. These tests will be fully explained beforehand, but will be based on Drill Question material, Quizzes, and the Vocabulary and Comprehension Questions which students will be told to mark at the end of each lesson. Finally, at the bottom of each lesson, there is a **Memorization Passage**. These will be quizzed every other lesson (two stanzas at a time), reviewed regularly, and tested at the end of each third of the course.

Drill and Background

Quiz #4 (Cantos XII & XIII)

Memorization Quiz: Stanzas 39 & 40. Recite Stanzas 1-38 together, and then quiz the students separately on Stanzas 39 & 40 as described on p. 12 of the Teacher Guide.

Background/Overview:

In Canto XIII, Dante and Beatrice are still in the Fourth Heaven, the Sun, which they entered in Canto X. So far in the Sun, Dante has been surrounded by two circles of twelve lights. From the first circle, St. Thomas Aquinas spoke to him, praising St. Francis and lamenting the Dominican order. From the second circle, St. Bonaventure spoke to him, praising St. Dominic and lamenting the Franciscan order. Now, Dante sees the two circles of lights spiraling around him like two constellations, and they are singing about the mysteries of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ. At this point, Aquinas addresses Dante again, finally getting to Dante's second question from Canto XI about Solomon. Aquinas had said that King Solomon was the wisest man that ever lived, and Dante wondered whether Adam or Christ was not wiser. Aquinas replies by giving a rather philosophical discussion of Creation. He explains that while the rest of creation is "secondary," created by the reflection of God's "Idea" sifting down through the heavens, Adam and Christ were created *directly* by God, and are therefore in a different category and cannot be compared to ordinary men like Solomon. Aquinas also qualifies Solomon's wisdom further in that it was a particular kind (royal prudence), in which field he definitely surpassed all. The canto ends with a warning against making hasty judgments, especially when something is not fully understood.

In Canto XIV, Dante and Beatrice are still surrounded by the two circles of lights, and Beatrice says Dante has one more question. He wants to know whether the brilliance of the souls will remain after the Last Judgment, and if so, whether it will not be too bright for their eyes when they are reunited with their bodies. This question is answered by Solomon, who says that their brilliance will indeed remain for eternity, and that they will be given the grace to bear it. As Solomon finishes, a third circle of lights forms around the other two, but it is so bright that Dante loses his vision, which Beatrice (Divine Revelation) restores for him. At this point, Dante is lifted up to the Fifth Heaven, Mars, which burns with a red glow. There he sees a vision of Christ, created by two bands of light which form a cross, made up of individual ruby lamps of the souls of this heaven, the Warriors of God.

THE PARADISO – CANTOS XIII & XIV

Canto XIII

Line

4.....**the fifteen brightest stars …** - Dante is trying to describe the beauty of the two circles of twelve souls spiraling around him, and he says they are like two constellations made up of the 15 brightest stars plus the 7 stars of the Big Dipper ("that Wain") plus the 2 bright stars of the Little Dipper ("the horn").

14.....**the daughter of King Minos** - the wreath from Ariadne's wedding with Dionysus became the constellation Corona Borealis when she died.

26.....**Three Persons in One …** - The souls are singing of the Trinity and of Christ.

32.....**the same lamp** - St. Thomas Aquinas, who had spoken of St. Francis (the "pauper").

34.....**one sheaf** - He answered Dante's first question about the Dominican order, and now is finally getting to the second question about Solomon.

37.....**that breast …** - Adam, from whom the rib was taken to form Eve.

40.....**that the lance pierced** - Christ, whose side was pierced on the cross. Dante queries whether the wisdom of Adam or Christ was not greater than Solomon's.

53.....**the Form** - Aquinas begins by discussing creation (in very Platonic terms), saying that all created things are a reflection of the "Idea" or "Form" in God's mind.

59.....**nine subsistant natures** - The grace of the Trinity (Light = Son, Source = Father, and Love = Spirit) creates by reflecting down through the 9 Orders of the Heavens.

61.....**potencies & contingencies** - potencies = things capable of existence, or of reflecting God's "Idea"; contingencies = things least capable of existence.

82.....**the animal perfection** - Adam. Whereas the rest of created things are "secondary," mere reflections of God's "Idea," Adam & Christ were *directly* created by God.

97.....**the number … of our motor-angels …** - Aquinas is listing abstract subjects which Solomon did not ask to understand, desiring only to rule God's people wisely.

115.....**he is a fool …** - Dante ends with a warning against hasty judgments, listing several foolish philosophers (lines 124-125) and heretical philosophers (line 127).

Canto XIV

Line

1.....**water in a round vessel** - Dante and Beatrice are standing in the middle of a double circle of souls. Aquinas' voice flows into the circle like ripples on water, and Beatrice's voice flows out in like fashion.

10.....**another need** - Dante is anxious to know whether the radiance of the souls will remain after the Last Judgment, and if so, whether it will not be too bright for their eyes when they are reunited with their bodies.

35.....**a voice** - The speaker is Solomon; the wise man answers a difficult question about the resurrection of the body.

40.....**Each robe reflects …** - The brilliance of the Blessed is in proportion to their love, which is, in turn, in proportion to the grace given to each.

46.....**increase of the light** - The "light" is God's grace; as grace increases, so love increases, and so their brilliance increases.

68.....**a splendor dawned** - A Third Circle of Lights appears encircling the first two, so bright that Dante loses his vision, which Beatrice (Divine Revelation) restores.

84.....**the next estate of light** - Dante has been lifted to **Mars**, the **Fifth Heaven**.

94.....**a ruby glow** - This indicates the red coloring of Mars, which symbolizes both the blood of Christ's sacrifice and the blood of all those who died for their faith.

101.....**the holy sign** - Dante sees a vision of Christ, created by two bands of light made up of many ruby-red lamps (the souls of **The Warriors**) which form a cross.

111.....**glowed more brilliantly** - Their radiance is *caritas*, so when two meet, their love for one another makes each flare brighter.

131.....**those dear eyes** - Usually Dante turns to Beatrice when awed by a vision, but here he is so overcome with bliss that he has not yet done so.

133.....**the living seals** - the influence of the Heavens, which "stamp" themselves on the souls of men—the more effectively, the higher the soul ascends.

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Vocabulary

1. numina a divine or awe-inspiring spirit

Comprehension Questions

1. How does Aquinas argue that Solomon was the wisest man? Aquinas argues that Solomon was the wisest man because the only people who could have been wiser—Adam and Christ—were *directly* created by God, and are therefore in a different category from the rest of men who are "secondary creations." Solomon's wisdom was also "kingly," a particular kind.

2. What kind of wisdom did Solomon seek, and what kind did he not seek? Solomon sought "royal prudence," the wisdom to rule God's people well, rather than seeking knowledge of various abstract subjects.

3. What is Dante's major question in Canto XIV, and who answers it? Dante's question is whether or not the radiance of the souls will remain after the Last Judgment and if so, whether it will not be too bright for their eyes when they are reunited with their bodies. Solomon answers him.

4. What is the significance of the ruby-red cross Dante sees in the Heaven of Mars? The ruby-red cross Dante sees indicates the red coloring of Mars and symbolizes both the blood of Christ's sacrifice and the blood of all the martyrs and warriors of God who died for their faith.

5. Why do the souls glow more brilliantly whenever they pass one another in the Cross of Lights? The souls glow more brilliantly whenever they pass one another in the Cross of Lights because their radiance is *caritas* (love for others), so whenever two souls meet, their love for one another makes each flare brighter.

Memorization Passage: *Inferno*, Canto I, Stanza 41

The Paradiso 95

Teacher Notes

Students should mark the following Comprehension Questions, which they will be responsible for on their test:

Comprehension Questions: #1, 4

A Note on the *Paradiso*:
The *Paradiso* is definitely the most difficult section of the *Comedy*, as it includes many discussions that are very philosophical in nature. Students can easily become bored or bogged down at these points. Encourage the students not to worry if they find some parts of the reading difficult to understand. Without overly belaboring these "philosophical sections," be sure to simply explain the main points of the discussions in each canto (which I have sought to simply state in the Background/Overview sections). It may also be necessary to go over the Comprehension Questions more carefully to give the students the chance to fully grasp the information.

Assignments

- Have students read Cantos XV & XVI before the next lesson.
- Remind students to review Drill Questions #1-50 and begin memorizing Stanza 41.
- Optional: Essay Assignment:

Have the students write a 2-page paper on the following topic. Don't forget to assign a due date, preferably giving no shorter than two weeks and no longer than three weeks.

Topic: Dante places great emphasis on the idea of structure and hierarchy in the universe. For him, this structure does not demonstrate unfair inequality, but is just, harmonious, and beautiful.
Choosing the structure/hierarchy of either Purgatory or Heaven, 1) describe it, 2) analyze its significance, and 3) argue whether you think its structure communicates injustice and inequality, or justice and beauty. For point #1, you must use supporting text.