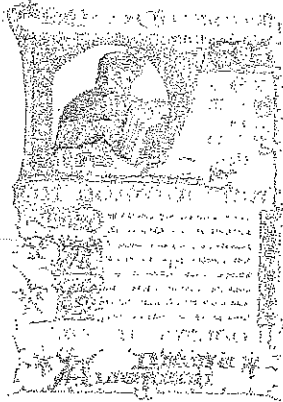


# DANTE'S INFERNO, from the Divine Comedy

## Structure and story



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First page of a manuscript of the Divine Comedy.

*The Divine Comedy* is composed of three *canticas* (or "cantiche"), *Inferno* (Hell), *Purgatorio* (Purgatory), and *Paradiso* (Paradise), composed each of 33 *cantos* (or "canti"). The very first *canto* serves as an introduction to the poem and is generally not considered to be part of the first *cantica*, bringing the total numbers of cantos to 100. The first *cantica*, *Inferno*, is by far the most famous of the three, and is often published separately under the title *Dante's Inferno*. As a part of the whole literary work, the first *canto* serves as an introduction to the entire *Divine Comedy*, making each of the *cantiche* 33 *canti* long. The number 3 is prominent in the work, represented here by the length of each *cantica* (also, three is the sacred number of the trinity and the rhyme scheme is believed by many critics to imply that in order to go forward, one must go back). Also, that they add up to 100 *canti* is not accidental. The verse scheme used, *terza rima*, is the hendecasyllable (line of eleven syllables), with the lines composing tercets according to the rhyme scheme ABA BCB CDC . . . ZYZ Z.

The poet tells in the first person his travel through the three realms of the dead, lasting during the Easter Triduum in the spring of 1300. His guide through Hell and Purgatory is the Latin poet Virgil, author of *The Aeneid*, and the guide through Paradise is Beatrice, Dante's ideal of a perfect woman. Beatrice was a real Florentine woman whom he met in childhood and admired from afar in the mode of the then-fashionable courtly love tradition.

In Northern Italy's political struggle between Guelphs and Ghibellines, Dante was part of the Guelphs, who in general favored the Papacy over the Holy Roman Emperor. Florence's Guelphs split into factions around 1300: the White Guelphs, who opposed secular rule by Pope Boniface VIII and who wished to preserve Florence's independence,

and the Black Guelphs, who favored the Pope's control of Florence. Dante was among the White Guelphs who were exiled from Florence in 1302 by the Lord-Mayor Cante dei Gabrielli di Gubbio, after troops under Charles of Valois entered the city, at the request of Boniface and in alliance with the Blacks. This exile, which lasted the rest of Dante's life, shows its influence in many parts of the Comedy, from prophecies of Dante's exile to Dante's views of politics to the damnation of some of his opponents.

In Hell and Purgatory, Dante shares in the sin and the penitence respectively. The last word in each of the three parts of The Divine Comedy is "stars."



Gustave Doré engravings illustrated *The Divine Comedy* (1861-1868), here Dante is lost in Canto 1.

### *Inferno*

The poem begins on Good Friday of the year 1300, "In the middle of our life's journey" (*Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*), and so opens in medias res. Dante is thirty-five years old, half of the biblically allotted age of 70 (Psalm 90:10), lost in a dark wood (perhaps, allegorically, contemplating suicide—as "wood" is figured in Canto XIII, and also the mention of suicide is made in Canto I of *Purgatorio* with "This man has not yet seen his last evening; But, through his madness, was so close to it, That there was hardly time to turn about" implying that when Virgil came to him he was on the verge of suicide or morally passing the point of no return), assailed by beasts (a lion, a leopard, and a she-wolf; allegorical depictions of temptations towards sin) he cannot evade, and unable to find the "straight way" (*diritta via*) to salvation (symbolized by the sun behind the

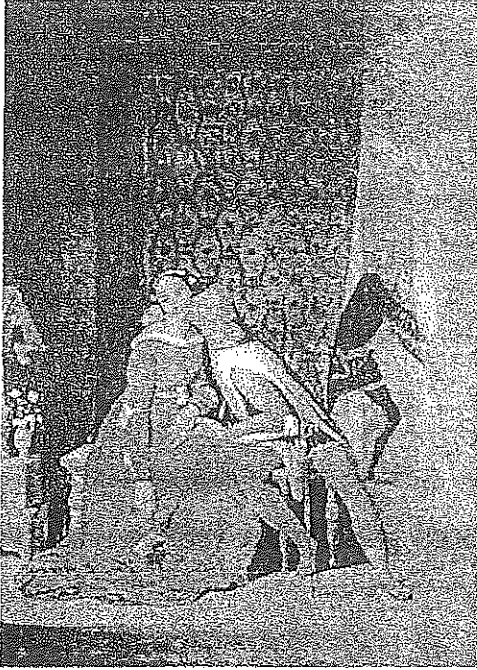
mountain). Conscious that he is ruining himself, that he is falling into a "deep place" (basso loco) where the sun is silent ('I sol tace), Dante is at last rescued by Virgil after his love Beatrice intercedes on his behalf (Canto II), and he and Virgil begin their journey to the underworld.

Dante passes through the Gate of Hell, on which is inscribed the famous phrase, "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*" or "*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.*"<sup>[1]</sup> Before entering Hell completely, Dante and his guide see the Opportunists, souls of people who in life did nothing, neither for good nor evil (among these Dante recognizes either Pope Celestine V, or Pontius Pilate; the text is ambiguous). Mixed with them are the outcasts, who took no side in the Rebellion of Angels. These souls are neither in Hell nor out of it, but reside on the shores of the Acheron, their punishment to eternally pursue a banner, and be pursued by wasps and hornets that continually sting them while maggots and other such insects drink their blood and tears. This symbolizes the sting of their conscience and the repugnance of sin.

Then Dante and Virgil reach the ferry that will take them across the river Acheron and to Hell proper. The ferry is piloted by Charon, who does not want to let Dante enter, for he is a living being. Their passage across is unknown since Virgil forces him to let them across, but Dante faints and does not awake until he is on the other side.

Virgil guides Dante through the nine circles of Hell. The circles are concentric, each new one representing further and further evil, culminating in the center of the earth, where Satan is held, bound. Each circle's sin is punished in a fashion fitting their crime: the sinner is inflicted by the chief sin he committed for all of eternity. Sinners such as these are found in Purgatory, but those in hell justify their sin and are unrepentant. Furthermore, those in hell have knowledge of the past and future, but not of the present. This is a joke on them in Dante's mind because after the Final Judgment time ends, those in hell would know nothing. The nine circles are:

### **The Circles of Hell**



☐  
"Gianciotto Discovers Paolo and Francesca" by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres.



☐  
"The Barque of Dante" by Eugène Delacroix

- **First Circle (Limbo).** Here reside the unbaptized and the virtuous pagans, who, though not sinful, did not accept Christ. They are not punished in an active sense, but rather grieve only their separation from God, without hope of reconciliation. The chief irony in this circle is that Limbo shares many characteristics with Elysian Fields, thus the damned are punished by living in their deficient form of heaven. Their crime was that they lacked faith-- the hope for something greater than rational minds can assume. Limbo includes fields and a castle, the dwelling place of virtuous souls of wisdom, including Virgil himself. In the castle Dante meets the poets Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan. (Canto IV) One is led to assume that all virtuous pagans find themselves here, but at least two are found in heaven and one in purgatory.

All of the condemned sinners are judged by Minos, who sentences each soul to one of the lower eight circles. These are structured according to the classical (Aristotelian) conception of virtue and vice, so that they are grouped into the sins of incontinence, violence, and fraud (which for many commentators are represented by the leopard, lion, and she-wolf<sup>(21)</sup>). The sins of incontinence — weakness in controlling one's desires and natural urges — are the mildest among them, and, correspondingly, appear first:

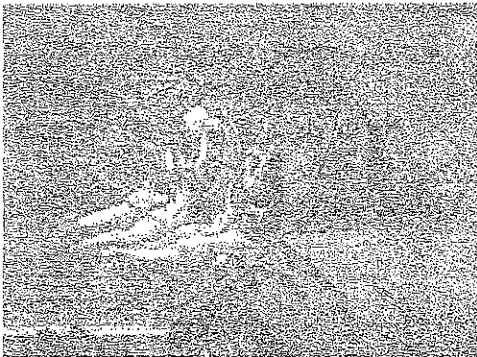
- **Second Circle.** Those overcome by lust are punished in this circle. These souls are blown about to and fro by a violent storm, without hope of rest. This symbolizes the power of lust to blow one about needlessly and aimlessly. Francesca da Rimini tells Dante how she and her husband's brother Paolo committed adultery and died a violent death at the hands of her husband. (Canto V)
- **Third Circle.** Cerberus guards the gluttons, forced to lie in the mud under continual cold rain and hail. Dante converses with a Florentine contemporary identified as Ciaccio ("Hog" - probably a nickname) regarding strife in Florence and the fate of prominent Florentines. (Canto VI) Dante shares in the sin by being a "glutton for information," by attempting to extract information about the future from Ciaccio for political gain.
- **Fourth Circle.** Those whose concern for material goods deviated from the desired mean are punished in this circle. They include the avaricious or miserly, who hoarded possessions, and the prodigal, who squandered them. Guarded by Plutus, each group pushes a great weight against the heavy weight of the other group. After the weights crash together the process starts over again. (Canto VII)
- **Fifth Circle.** In the swamp-like water of the river Styx, the wrathful fight each other on the surface, and the sullen or slothful lie gurgling beneath the water. Phlegyas reluctantly transports Dante and Virgil across the Styx in his skiff. On the way they are accosted by Filippo Argenti, a Black Guelph from a prominent family. (Cantos VII and VIII)

The lower parts of hell are contained within the walls of the city of Dis, which is itself surrounded by the Styx. Punished within Dis are active (rather than passive) sins. The walls of Dis are guarded by fallen angels. Virgil is unable to convince them to let Dante and him enter, and the Furies threaten Dante. An angel sent from Heaven secures entry for the poets. (Cantos VIII and IX)

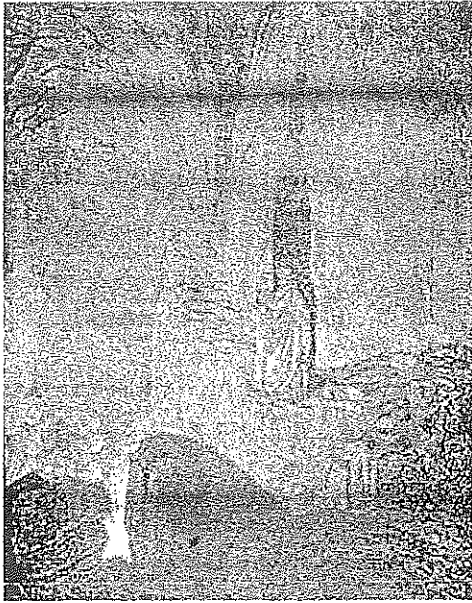
- **Sixth Circle.** Heretics are trapped in flaming tombs. Dante discourses with a pair of Florentines in one of the tombs: Farinata degli Uberti, a Ghibelline; and Cavalcante de' Cavalcanti, a Guelph who was the father of Dante's friend, fellow poet Guido Cavalcanti. (Cantos X and XI)
- **Seventh Circle.** This circle houses the violent. Its entry is guarded by the Minotaur, and it is divided into three rings:

- Outer ring, housing the violent against people and property, who are immersed in Phlegethon, a river of boiling blood, to a level commensurate with their sins. The Centaurs, commanded by Chiron, patrol the ring. The centaur Nessus guides the poets along Phlegethon and across a ford in the river. (Canto XII)
- Middle ring: In this ring are the suicides, who are transformed into gnarled thorny bushes and trees that are only able to speak when a branch is broken. They are torn at by the Harpies. Unique among the dead, the suicides will not be bodily resurrected after the final judgment. Instead they will maintain their bushy form, with their own corpses hanging from the limbs. Dante breaks a twig off of one of the bushes and hears the tale of Pier delle Vigne, who committed suicide after falling out of favor with Emperor Frederick II. The profligate wasters, the other residents of this ring, are chased by ferocious dogs through the thorny undergrowth. (Canto XIII)
- Inner ring: The violent against God (blasphemers), the violent against nature (sodomites), and the violent against art (usurers), all reside in a desert of flaming sand with fiery flakes raining from the sky. The blasphemers lie on the sand, the usurers sit, and the sodomites wander about in groups. Dante converses with two Florentine sodomites from different groups: Brunetto Latini, a poet; and Iacopo Rusticucci, a politician. (Cantos XIV through XVII) It is important to note that it was not Dante's position that all sodomites were destined for hell fire, for repentant sodomites can be found on the top of Mount Purgatory.

The last two circles of Hell punish sins that involve conscious fraud or treachery. The circles can be reached only by descending a vast cliff, which Dante and Virgil do on the back of Geryon, a winged monster represented by Dante as having the head of an honest man and a body that ends in a scorpion-like stinger. (Canto XVII)



Dante's guide rebuffs Malacoda and his fiends between *bolgia* five and six in the Eighth Circle of Hell, *Inferno*, Canto 21.



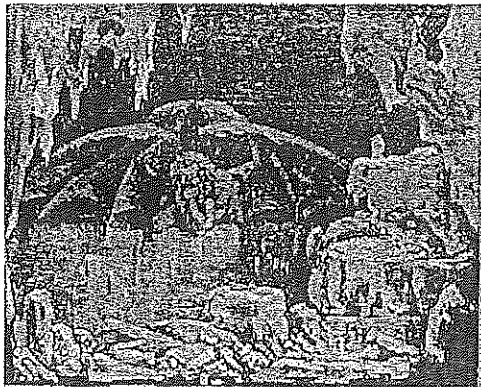
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Dante climbs the flinty steps in *bolgia* seven in the Eighth Circle of Hell, *Inferno*, Canto 26.

- **Eighth Circle.** The fraudulent—those guilty of deliberate, knowing evil—are located in a circle named Malebolge ("Evil Pockets"), divided into ten ditches, with bridges spanning the ditches:
  - Bolgia 1: Panderers and seducers walk in separate lines in opposite directions, whipped by demons. (Canto XVIII)
  - Bolgia 2: Flatterers are steeped in human excrement. (Canto XVIII)
  - Bolgia 3: Those who committed simony are placed head-first in holes in the rock, with flames burning on the soles of their feet. One of them, Pope Nicholas III, denounces as simonists two of his successors, Pope Boniface VIII and Pope Clement V. (Canto XIX)
  - Bolgia 4: Sorcerers and false prophets have their heads twisted around on their bodies backward, so they can only see what is behind them. (Canto XX)
  - Bolgia 5: Corrupt politicians (barrators) are immersed in a lake of boiling pitch, guarded by devils, the Malebranche ("Evil Claws"). Their leader, Malacoda ("Evil Tail"), assigns a troop to escort Virgil and Dante to the next bridge. The troop hook and torment Ciampolo, who identifies some Italian grafters and then tricks the Malebranche in order to escape back into the pitch. (Cantos XXI through XXIII)
  - Bolgia 6: Hypocrites listlessly walk along wearing gold-gilded lead cloaks. Dante speaks with Catalano and Loderingo, members of the Jovial Friars. It is also ironic in this canto that whilst in the company of hypocrites, the pair also discover that the guardians of the fraudulent (the malebranche) are hypocrites themselves, as they find that they have lied to



them, giving false directions, when at the same time they are punishing liars for similar sins. (Canto XXIII)

- Bolgia 7: Thieves, guarded by the centaur (as Dante describes him) Cacus, are pursued and bitten by snakes. The snake bites make them undergo various transformations, with some resurrected after being turned to ashes, some mutating into new creatures, and still others exchanging natures with the snakes, becoming snakes themselves that chase the other thieves in turn. (Cantos XXIV and XXV)
- Bolgia 8: Fraudulent advisors are encased in individual flames. Dante includes Ulysses and Diomedes together here for their role in the Trojan War. Ulysses tells the tale of his fatal final voyage, where he left his home and family to sail to the end of the Earth. He equated life as a pursuit of knowledge that humanity can attain through effort, and in his search God sank his ship outside of Mount Purgatory. This symbolizes the inability of the individual to carve out one's own salvation. Instead, one must be totally subservient to the will of God and realize the inability of one to be a God unto oneself. Guido da Montefeltro recounts how his advice to Pope Boniface VIII resulted in his damnation, despite Boniface's promise of absolution. (Cantos XXVI and XXVII)
- Bolgia 9: A sword-wielding devil hacks at the sowers of discord. As they make their rounds the wounds heal, only to have the devil tear apart their bodies again. Muhammad tells Dante to warn the schismatic and heretic Fra Dolcino. (Cantos XXVIII and XXIX)
- Bolgia 10: Groups of various sorts of falsifiers (alchemists, counterfeiters, perjurers, and impersonators) are afflicted with different types of diseases. (Cantos XXIX and XXX)



Satan is trapped in the frozen central zone in in the Ninth Circle of Hell, *Inferno*, Canto 34.

The Ninth Circle is ringed by classical and Biblical giants. The giants are standing either on, or on a ledge above, the ninth circle of Hell, and are visible from the waist up at the ninth circle of the Malebolge. The giant Antaeus lowers Dante and Virgil into the pit that forms the ninth circle of Hell. (Canto XXXI)

- Ninth Circle. Traitors, distinguished from the "merely" fraudulent in that their acts involve betraying one in a special relationship to the betrayer, are frozen in a lake of ice known as Cocytus. Each group of traitors is encased in ice to a different height, ranging from only the waist down to complete immersion. The circle is divided into four concentric zones:
  - Zone 1: Caïna, named for Cain, is home to traitors to their kindred. (Canto XXXII)
  - Zone 2: Antenora is named for Antenor of Troy, who according to medieval tradition betrayed his city to the Greeks. Traitors to political entities, such as party, city, or country, are located here. Count Ugolino pauses from gnawing on the head of his rival Archbishop Ruggieri to describe how Ruggieri imprisoned and starved him and his children. (Cantos XXXII and XXXIII)
  - Zone 3: Ptolomæa is probably named for Ptolemy, the captain of Jericho, who invited Simon Maccabaeus and his sons to a banquet and there killed them. Traitors to their guests are punished here. Fra Alberigo explains that sometimes a soul falls here before the time that Atropos (the Fate who cuts the thread of life) should send it. Their bodies on Earth are immediately possessed by a fiend. (Canto XXXIII)
  - Zone 4: Judecca is for traitors to their lords and benefactors. At the center is Satan, who has three faces, one red, one black, and one a pale yellow, each having a mouth that chews on a prominent traitor. Satan himself is represented as a giant, terrifying beast, weeping tears from his six eyes, which mix with the traitors' blood sickeningly. He is waist deep in ice, and beats his six wings as if trying to escape, but the icy wind that emanates only further ensures his imprisonment (as well as that of the others in the ring). The sinners in the mouths of Satan are Brutus and Cassius in the left and right mouths, respectively, who were involved in the assassination of Julius Caesar (an act which, to Dante, represented the destruction of a unified Italy), and Judas Iscariot (the namesake of this zone) in the central, most vicious mouth, who betrayed Jesus. Judas is being administered the most horrifying torture of the three traitors, his head in the mouth of Lucifer, and his back being forever skinned by the claws of Lucifer. (Canto XXXIV) What is seen here is a perverted trinity. Satan is impotent, ignorant, and evil while God can be attributed as the opposite: all powerful, all knowing, and good.

The two poets escape by climbing the ragged fur of Lucifer, passing through the center of the earth, emerging in the other hemisphere just before dawn on Easter Sunday beneath a sky studded with stars.

### *Purgatorio*

Having survived the depths of Hell, Dante and Virgil ascend out of the undergloom, to the Mountain of Purgatory on the far side of the world (in Dante's time, it was believed that Hell existed underneath Jerusalem). The Mountain is on an island, the only land in

the Southern Hemisphere. At the shores of Purgatory, Dante and Virgil are attracted by a musical performance by Casella, but are reprimanded by Cato, a pagan who has been placed by God as the general guardian of the approach to the mountain. The text gives no indication whether Cato's soul is destined for heaven: his symbolic significance has been much debated. (Cantos I and II).

Dante starts the ascent on Mount Purgatory. On the lower slopes (designated as "ante-Purgatory" by commentators) Dante meets first a group of excommunicates, detained for a period thirty times as long as their period of contumacy. Ascending higher, he encounters those too lazy to repent until shortly before death, and those who suffered violent deaths (often due to leading extremely sinful lives). These souls will be admitted to Purgatory thanks to their genuine repentance, but must wait outside for an amount of time equal to their lives on earth (Cantos III through VI). Finally, Dante is shown a beautiful valley where he sees the lately-deceased monarchs of the great nations of Europe, and a number of other persons whose devotion to public and private duties hampered their faith (Cantos VII and VIII). From this valley Dante is carried (while asleep) up to the gates of Purgatory proper (Canto IX).

From there, Virgil guides the pilgrim Dante through the seven terraces of Purgatory. These correspond to the seven deadly sins, each terrace purging a particular sin in an appropriate manner. Those in purgatory can leave their circle whenever they like, but essentially there is an honors system where no one leaves until they have corrected the nature within themselves that caused them to commit that sin. Souls can only move upwards and never backwards, since the intent of Purgatory is for souls to ascend towards God in Heaven, and can ascend only during daylight hours, since the light of God is the only true guidance.

### **The Terraces of Purgatory**

On the first three terraces of Purgatory are purified those whose sins were caused by perverted love, love directed toward vice instead of God.

- First Terrace: Pride, by carrying a heavy weight on their backs. The wearer is unable to stand up straight (Cantos X through XII). This teaches the sinner that pride puts weight on the soul and it is better to throw it off. Furthermore, there are stones of historical and mythological examples of pride to learn from. With the weight on one's back, one cannot help but see this carved pavement and learn from it. After completing this terrace, like every terrace, an Angel clears a letter P from Dante's head. Each time a P is removed, Dante's body feels lighter, because he becomes less and less weighed down from sin.
- Second Terrace: Envy, by having one's eyes sewn shut, and wearing clothing that makes the soul indistinguishable from the ground (Cantos XIII through XV). This is akin to a Falconer who sews the eyes of a falcon shut in order to train it. God is the Falconer and is training the souls not to envy others and to direct their love towards Him.

- Third Terrace: Wrath, by walking around in acrid smoke (Cantos XV through XVII). Souls correct themselves by learning how wrath has blinded their vision, impeding their judgment.

On the fourth terrace we find sinners whose sin was that of deficient love - that is, sloth or acedia.

- Fourth Terrace: Sloth, by continually running (Cantos XVIII and XIX). Those who were slothful in life can only purge this sin by being zealous in their desire for penance.

On the fifth through seventh terraces are those who sinned by loving good things, but loving them in a disordered way.

- Fifth Terrace: Avarice & Prodigality, by lying face-down on the ground, unable to move (Cantos XIX through XXI). Excessive concern for earthly goods - whether in the form of greed or extravagance - is punished and purified. The sinner learns to turn his desire from possessions, power or position to God. It is here that the poets meet the soul of Statius, who has completed his purgation and joins them on their ascent to paradise.
- Sixth Terrace: Gluttony, by abstaining from any food or drink (Cantos XXII through XXIV). Here, people's desire to eat a forbidden fruit causes their shade to starve. Once they master their desire to be a glutton, their appetite for sin leaves them and they are no longer starved by it.
- Seventh Terrace: Lust, by burning in an immense wall of flames (Cantos XXV through XXVII). All of those who committed sexual sins, both heterosexual and homosexual, are purified by the fire. Excessive sexual desire misdirects one's love from God and this terrace is meant to correct that. In addition, perhaps because all sin has its roots in love, every soul who has completed his penance on the lower six cornices must pass through the wall of flame before ascending to the Earthly Paradise.



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Dante's meeting with Beatrice, by John William Waterhouse

The ascent of the mountain culminates at the summit, which is the Garden of Eden (Cantos XXVIII through XXXIII). This place is meant to return one to a state of innocence that existed before the sin of Adam and Eve caused the fall from grace. Here Dante meets Matelda, a woman of grace and beauty who prepares souls for their ascent to

heaven. With her Dante witnesses a highly symbolic procession that may be read as an allegory of the Church. One participant in the procession is Beatrice, whom Dante loved in childhood, and at whose request Virgil was commissioned to bring Dante on his journey.

Virgil, as a pagan, is a permanent denizen of Limbo, the first circle of Hell, and may not enter Paradise: he vanishes. Beatrice then becomes the second guide (accompanied by an extravagant procession), and will accompany Dante through the Paradise.

Dante drinks from the River Lethe, which causes the soul to forget past sins, and then from the River Eunoe, which effects the renewal of memories of good deeds. Thus purified, souls can direct their love fully towards God to the best of their inherent capability to do so. They are then ready to leave Mount Purgatory for Paradise. Being totally purged of sin, *Purgatorio* ends with Dante's vision aimed at the stars, anticipating his ascent to heaven.

### *Paradiso*

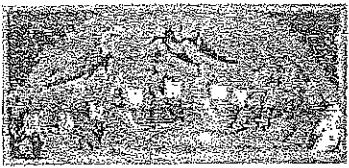


Illustration of Dante's *Paradiso*, by Giovanni di Paolo, (between 1442 and c.1450)

After an initial ascension (Canto I), Beatrice guides Dante through the nine spheres of Heaven. These are concentric and spherical, similar to Aristotelian and Ptolemaic cosmology. Dante admits that the vision of heaven he receives is the one that his human eyes permit him to see. Thus, the vision of heaven found in the Cantos is Dante's own personal vision, ambiguous in its true construction. The addition of a moral dimension means that a soul that has reached Paradise stops at the level applicable to it. Souls are allotted to the point of heaven that fits with their human ability to love God. Thus, there is a heavenly hierarchy, but everyone is satisfied with his post, because he understands the fact that he is not capable of any greater experience.

The nine spheres are:

- First Sphere: The moon - those who abandoned their vows (Cantos II through V). Dante meets Piccarda, sister of Dante's friend Forese Donati, who died shortly after being forcibly removed from her convent. Beatrice discourses on the freedom of the will, and the inviolability of sacred vows.
- Second Sphere: Mercury - those who did good out of a desire for fame (Cantos V through VII). Justinian recounts the history of the Roman Empire. Beatrice explains to Dante the atonement of Christ for the sins of humanity.
- Third Sphere: Venus - those who did good out of love (Cantos VIII and IX). Dante meets Charles Martel of Anjou, who decries those who adopt inappropriate

- vocations, and Cunizza da Romano. Folquet de Marseilles points out Rahab, the brightest soul among those of this sphere.
- Fourth Sphere: The sun - souls of the wise (Cantos X through XIV). Dante is addressed by St. Thomas Aquinas, who recounts the life of St. Francis of Assisi and laments the corruption of his own Dominican Order. Dante is then met by St. Bonaventure, a Franciscan, who recounts the life of St. Dominic, and laments the corruption of the Franciscan Order. Finally, Aquinas introduces King Solomon, who answers Dante's question about the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.
  - Fifth Sphere: Mars - those who fought for Christianity (Cantos XIV through XVIII). The souls in this sphere form an enormous cross. Dante speaks with the soul of his ancestor Cacciaguida, who praises the former virtues of the residents of Florence, recounts the rise and fall of Florentine families, and foretells Dante's exile from Florence before finally introducing some notable warrior souls (among them Joshua, Roland, Charlemagne, Godfrey of Bouillon, and others).
  - Sixth Sphere: Jupiter - those who personified justice (Cantos XVIII through XX).
  - Seventh Sphere: Saturn - the contemplative (Cantos XXI and XXII). For example, Monks are found here.
  - Eighth Sphere: The fixed stars - the blessed (Cantos XXII through XXVII). Here, Dante is tested on faith by Saint Peter, hope by Saint James, and love by Saint John the Evangelist. Dante justifies his medieval belief in astrology that the power of constellations draw themselves from God.
  - Ninth Sphere: The Primum Mobile ("First/Best Mover") - angels (Cantos XXVII through XXIX).

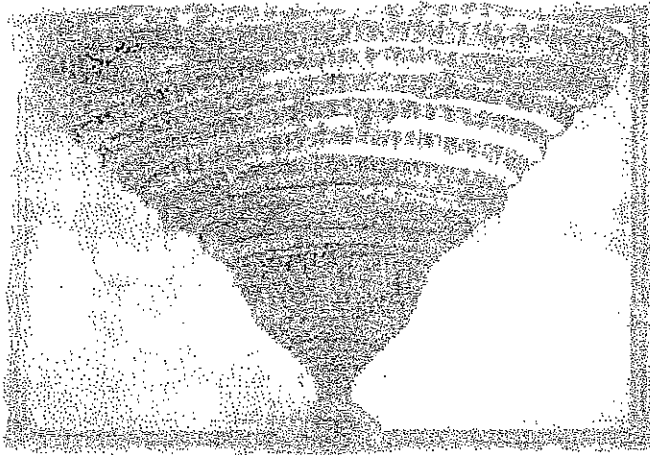



Dante and Beatrice gaze upon the highest Heaven; from Gustave Doré's illustrations for the *Divine Comedy, Paradiso, Canto 31*

Beatrice leaves Dante with Saint Bernard who prays to Mary on behalf of Dante and Dante is allowed to see both Jesus and Mary. From here, Dante ascends to a substance beyond physical existence, called the Empyrean Heaven (Cantos XXX through XXXIII). Here he comes face-to-face with God Himself, and is granted understanding of the Divine and of human nature. His vision is improved beyond that of human comprehension. God appears as three equally large rings spinning within each other representing the Holy Spirit with the essence of each part of God, who according to Dante can equally be called a plural and a singular. After this vision, the book ends with Dante's vision growing ever

stronger, and the vision of God becomes equally inimitable and inexplicable that no word can come close to explaining what he saw, offering him a vision how Divine Love is the power behind existence. Essentially, Dante described as much as one can in words the experience of the beatific vision.

Concepts of Heaven	
<b>Judeo-Christian</b>	Kingdom of God   Garden of Eden · Paradise   New Jerusalem
<b>Islamic</b>	Jannah   Hourī   Sidrat-al-Muntaha
<b>Mormon</b>	Celestial Kingdom   Spirit world
<b>Ancient Greek</b>	Elysium   Emyrean   Hesperides
<b>Celtic</b>	Annwn   Tír na nÓg   Mag Mell
<b>Norse</b>	Valhalla   Asgard
<b>Other Indo-European cultures</b>	Paradise   Olam Haba   Svarga   Aaru   The Summerland   Myth of Er   Fortunate Isles
<b>Related concepts</b>	Nirvana   Millennialism   Utopianism   Golden Age   Arcadia   Pearly gates



 Sandro Botticelli's *Chart of Hell* c. 1490.

## Thematic concern

*The Divine Comedy* can be described simply as an allegory: Each canto, and the episodes therein, can contain many alternate meanings. Dante's allegory, however, is more complex, and, in explaining how to read the poem (see the "Letter to Can Grande della Scala"), he outlines other levels of meaning besides the allegory (the historical, the moral, the literal, and the anagogical).

The structure of the poem, likewise, is quite complex, with mathematical and numerological patterns arching throughout the work, particularly threes and nines. What has made the poem as great as it is are its particularly human qualities: Dante's skillful delineation of the characters he encounters in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise; his bitter denunciations of Florentine and Italian politics; and his powerful poetic imagination. Dante's use of real characters, according to Dorothy Sayers in her introduction to her translation of "L'Inferno", allows Dante the freedom of not having to involve the reader in description, and allows him to "[make] room in his poem for the discussion of a great many subjects of the utmost importance, thus widening its range and increasing its variety."

Dante called the poem "Comedy" (the adjective "Divine" added later in the 16th century) because poems in the ancient world were classified as High ("Tragedy") or Low ("Comedy"). Low poems had happy endings and were of everyday or vulgar subjects, while High poems were for more serious matters. Dante was one of the first in the Middle Ages to write of a serious subject, the Redemption of man, in the low and vulgar Italian language and not the Latin language as one might expect for such a serious topic.



## The Seven Deadly Sins

### Lust

- The first deadly sin is the sin of **Lust**. Lust is usually thought of as involving obsessive or excessive thoughts or desires of a sexual nature. In Dante's view lust led to "excessive love of others," which therefore made love and devotion to God secondary. .

### Gluttony

- The second deadly sin is the sin of **gluttony**. Gluttony is the over-indulgence and over-consumption of anything to the point of waste. It can refer to over-eating, which is a sin because it withholds food from the needy and also debases the glutton by making him a slave to base, animal desires, such as his appetite. As such gluttony distracts the sinner from the spiritual life.

### Greed

- The third deadly sin is the sin of **greed** or avarice. Like gluttony, this sin is a sin of excess. Its most common form is the excessive love of money, manifested in various forms such as miserliness and unethical business practices. This sin turns the sinner away from God by promoting selfishness, destroying charity, and creating a preoccupation with the acquisition and preservation of material things and possessions. As such this sin blinds the sinner to the fact that material possessions such as gold are worthless compared to the everlasting rewards of heaven. But because the sinner guilty of greed does not see that what he covets the most is worthless, he ignores the treasure and rewards of Heaven and therefore does not follow the right path.

### Sloth

- The fourth deadly sin is the sin of **sloth**. This sin has a somewhat ambiguous definition and has gone through some changes over the centuries. Originally, sloth referred to sadness, apathy and joylessness, which reflected the sinner's failure to see God's gifts and His goodness. Dante defined sloth as the "failure to love God with all one's heart, all one's mind and all one's soul." Dante felt that this was the "middle sin" in that it was the only sin characterized by an absence or inadequacy of love. In modern times, sloth is interpreted as the sin of laziness, of an unwillingness to act, an unwillingness to care (rather than a failure to love God and His works).