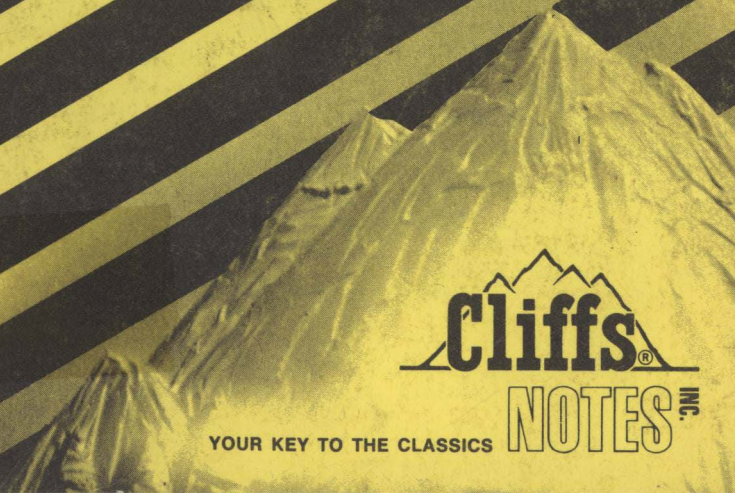


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General Introduction

The story of the *Divine Comedy* is simple: one day Dante finds himself lost in a dark wood; but Virgil appears, rescues him from that savage place, and guides him to a contemplation of Hell and Purgatory. Then, having confessed his faults, and with Beatrice as his guide, he is conducted into Paradise and attains a glimpse of the face of God.

Dante gave the title of *Comedy* to his masterpiece because the word indicated a pleasant or (as Dante himself put it) a "prosperous" ending after a "horrible" beginning. Dante used the humble lowly language "which even women can understand," rather than the sublime language of tragedy. The adjective "divine" was added to the title later, apparently by an editor some time in the sixteenth century.

The *Divine Comedy* is distinctly a product of medieval times. Its view of the universe is the Ptolemaic view; its social setting that of the jealous, warring city-states of Italy, and of the powerful, arrogant, and feuding aristocrats and the political factions which supported them. Over all were the contesting powers of a fading empire and a grasping papacy.

In attempting understanding, one may become so entangled in the complexities of the *Comedy* and its environment that one loses sight of Dante the man. And it was Dante, the man of his times, who wrote the *Divine Comedy*—a man whose lifelong devotion to the figure of Beatrice was in the highest tradition of courtly love; whose political feuds were first with the party of the opposition, then with factions within his own party, until he formed a party of his own; a man who believed firmly in alchemy and astrology, in witchcraft and spells; and finally, an intensely human man, with fierce hatreds and loyalties, with no little vanity, with pity, and with love.

The date of the composition of the *Divine Comedy* is uncertain, but undoubtedly the poem was written during Dante's exile. Even here there is some disagreement, for there is a tradition which insists that the first seven cantos were written before he was banished from Florence. The predominant opinion is that it was begun around 1307; the setting of the poem is the year 1300. There is some evidence that the *Inferno* had been completed and circulated before 1314, and that the *Purgatorio* followed very soon after. The *Paradiso* was completed

shortly before Dante's death in 1321 and released posthumously by his sons.

The *Divine Comedy* is a monumental work of imagination, dedicated in spirit to an immortal love; it is mortal to the point of repugnance in its beginning, mystical almost beyond understanding at its close.

DANTE'S LIFE

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in May, 1265, of an old family, of noble origin but no longer wealthy. His education was probably typical of any youth of his time and station: he studied the *trivium* and *quadrivium*, probably spent a year, or part of a year, at the University of Bologna, and came under the influence of some of the learned men of his day. Most notable of these was Ser Brunetto Latini, whose influence Dante records in his poem (*Inferno* 15).

In accordance with custom, Dante was betrothed in his youth to Gemma Donati, daughter of Manetto Donati. These betrothals and marriages were matters of family alliance, and Gemma's dowry was fixed as early as 1277, when Dante was twelve years old. There were at least three children: sons Pietro and Jacopo, and a daughter Antonia, who later entered a convent at Ravenna and took the name of Sister Beatrice. A third son, Giovanni, is sometimes mentioned.

There can be no doubt that the great love of Dante's life, and the greatest single influence on his work, was his beloved Beatrice. He first met her when he was nine years old and she was eight. The meeting took place in her father's home, probably at a May Day festival. Dante has described this meeting in his *Vita Nuova*. He tells of seeing the child Beatrice, wearing a crimson gown and looking like an angel. From that day on, his life and work was dedicated to her. He mentions no other meeting with her until nine years later, when he saw her on the street, dressed in white, accompanied by two other girls. She greeted him sweetly by name, and he was in raptures. A short time later, having heard gossip linking his name with another young woman, she passed him without speaking, and Dante mourned for days, determining to mend his ways.

If all this seems slightly preposterous, it is necessary to remember two things: that the young women of marriageable age were so strictly chaperoned that it was virtually impossible to have even a speaking acquaintance with them and that Dante's love for Beatrice was in the strictest tradition of courtly love, wherein the lover addressed his beloved as being completely out of his reach, and which viewed marriage between the lovers as impossible, in fact undesirable.

To what extent this was, at first, a true and lasting love cannot be determined. There is little doubt that Dante enjoyed the sweet misery of his situation and the sympathy of other ladies for his plight. After the death of Beatrice, and particularly after his exile, he put away his adolescent fancies, and Beatrice became a true inspiration.

Beatrice was married in about 1287 to Simone de' Bardi, a wealthy banker of Florence, a marriage of alliance of the two houses and one completely immaterial to Dante and his work.

Dante wrote many poems in praise of his lady during her lifetime, and when she died in 1290, at the age of twenty-five, he was inconsolable. He had had a dream of her death, and in her honor collected the poems he had written about her, which are included in the *Vita Nuova*. The later *Comedy* was also inspired by her memory.

Dante's public life began in 1289, when he fought against Arezzo at Campaldino. In 1295 he was one of the council for the election of the priors of Florence, and in May, 1300, went as ambassador to San Gimignano to invite that commune to an assembly of the Guelph cities of Tuscany. From June 15 to August of the same year, he was one of the priors of Florence, and it was during that year that his best friend, Guido Cavalcanti (*Inferno*, Canto 22), caused a street riot on May Day. Guido was exiled to Sarzana by the officers of the city, one of whom was Dante. Sarzana proved so unhealthful that Guido petitioned to return to Florence, and was allowed to do so. He died of malaria, contracted in Sarzana, in August, 1300.

Dante was vigorously opposed to the interference of the pope in secular affairs, and was induced to take a stand with the Whites when the Blacks favored the intrigues of the pope. Charles of Valois was coming to Florence, ostensibly as a peacemaker between the two factions but in reality as a partisan of the Blacks and supporter of the pope. In October, 1301, Dante and two other men were chosen as ambassadors on a mission to Rome, rightly suspecting the motives of Charles as

peacemaker. After they had left Florence, the Blacks easily took over control of the city with the help of Charles, and Dante was exiled from his native city, never to return.

The terms of exile were harsh: Dante was charged with graft, with intrigue against the peace of the city, and with hostility against the pope, among other things. The list of charges is so long that it is reminiscent of those brought against the political enemies of any party in power today. In addition, a heavy fine was imposed, and Dante was forbidden to hold public office in Florence for the rest of his life.

Dante did not appear to answer the charges—it probably would not have been safe to do so—and a heavier penalty was imposed: in addition to confiscation of his property, he was sentenced to be burnt alive if caught. Also, his sons, when they reached their legal majority at age fourteen, were compelled to join him in exile.

Thus began Dante's wanderings. At first he joined in the political intrigues of his fellow exiles, but, disgusted by what he considered their wickedness and stupidity, he formed a party by himself. It is not known exactly where he spent the years of his exile, though part of the time he was with the Malaspini, and he also spent time at the court of Can Grande della Scala in Verona, with whom he remained on good terms for the rest of his life.

Once during the years of his banishment his hopes for peace in Italy, and his own return to Florence, were revived. This was in the reign of Henry VII of Luxemburg, who announced his intention of coming to Italy to be crowned. Dante addressed a letter to his fellow citizens urging them to welcome Henry as emperor. When Henry was met by strong opposition, Dante in great bitterness sent a letter to him, urging him to put down the rebellion quickly; he also addressed a letter in similar vein to Florence, using abusive terms which could not be forgiven. When Henry's expedition failed, and the hopes of empire died with him, Dante was not included in the amnesty granted certain exiles. Later, amnesty was extended to him on the condition that he admit his guilt and ask forgiveness publicly, which the poet refused to do. His sentence of death was renewed.

Dante's last years were spent in Ravenna, under the protection of Guido Novello da Polenta. They seem to have been years of relative contentment in compatible company—but Ravenna was not Florence. One final mission was entrusted to Dante: he was sent to Venice in the

summer of 1321 by his patron in an unsuccessful attempt to avert a war between Ravenna and Venice. On his return trip, he fell ill, possibly of malaria. He reached Ravenna and died there on the night of September 13, 1321.

He was buried with the honors due him. Several times during the following centuries, the city of Florence sought to have his body interred with honor in the place of his birth, but even the intercession of popes could not bring this about. His opinion of the citizens of his city was clearly stated in the full title of his great work: *The Comedy of Dante Alighieri, Florentine by Citizenship, Not by Morals*.

Dante still lies in the monastery of the Franciscan friars in Ravenna.

DANTE'S WORLD

Dante's world was threefold: the world of politics, the world of theology, and the world of learning. His *Comedy* encompasses and builds upon all of these, and so interdependent were they that it would be impossible to say that any one was the most important.

Throughout the Middle Ages, politics was dominated by the struggle between the two greatest powers of that age: the papacy and the empire. Each believed itself to be of divine origin and to be indispensable to the welfare of mankind. The cause of this struggle was the papal claim to temporal power, supported and justified by the spurious "Donation of Constantine." This document, which was a forgery of the eighth century, maintained that Emperor Constantine, before leaving for Byzantium, had transferred to the Bishop of Rome, Pope Sylvester I, political dominion over Italy and the western empire.

Dante lived in an era of virtually autonomous communes, ruled by either an autocratic hereditary count or a council elected from an aristocratic—and exclusive—few. The political situation was never stable, and the vendettas went on forever, family against family, party against party, city against city.

The strife began in the tenth century with Otto I, the emperor who laid the foundation for the power which was to transform Germany into the mightiest state in Europe and who dreamed of restoring the Holy Roman Empire. At the beginning of the eleventh century, the

situation worsened, with Henry IV humiliated at Canossa by an aggressive opponent, autocratic Pope Gregory VII (Hildebrand).

In the first part of the thirteenth century, the growing conflict was headed by two outstanding antagonists: Innocent III, the most powerful of all the popes, and the brilliant Frederick II, King of Germany, Emperor of Rome, and King of Naples and Sicily, the most gifted of all the monarchs of the Middle Ages. The enmity of the pope, who was firmly resolved to free Italy from German authority, shook the stability of the empire, which was already undermined by the insubordination of the princes in Germany and the rebellion of some of the city-states of northern Italy.

When Frederick died in 1250, he left a very unstable situation to be handled by his successors, especially in Italy. There, in 1266, his illegitimate son Manfred was defeated and killed in the battle fought at Benevento against Charles of Anjou, who had been summoned to Italy by the pope. Two years later, this same Charles defeated Corradino, Frederick's grandson, at Tagliacozzo, and put him to death. Thus the line of the descendants of the great emperor was extinguished, and Italy was lost to the empire.

In reading Dante, indeed throughout medieval history, one hears much about two major political factions, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. In Italy the party lines were originally drawn over the dispute between the papacy and the emperor for temporal authority. The Ghibellines, representing the feudal aristocracy, wished to retain the power of the emperor in Italy as well as in Germany. The Guelphs were mainly supported by the rising middle-class merchant society, who hoped to rid Italy of foreign influence and maintain the control of governments in their independent communes. They espoused the cause of the papacy in opposition to the emperor.

The rivalry between the two parties not only set one city against another but also divided the same city and the same family into factions. In time the original alliances and allegiances became confused in strange ways. For example, Dante, who was a Guelph, was a passionate supporter of imperial authority all his life.

In Florence the Guelphs and Ghibellines succeeded each other, alternately ruling the city. During the reign of Frederick II, the Ghibellines, supported by the emperor, gained the upper hand and drove the Guelphs out of the city. But at the death of Frederick II, in 1250, the

Guelphs were recalled to Florence for a temporary reconciliation and later gained control of the city.

The Ghibellines again returned to power in 1260, and ruled the city until 1266, but the next year the Guelphs, aided by French forces, gained supremacy in the city, and the Ghibellines left Florence, never to return.

Dante was an ardent White Guelph, putting his hopes for Italy's future in the restoration of the empire, and to the end of his days was politically active, though ultimately he was forced by the violence of his views to form a party "by himself," and, as a White, was actually allied to the Ghibellines.

Not even the supremacy of the Guelphs, however, endowed Florence with a peaceful and stable government, for in 1300 the Guelph party split into two factions: the Whites and the Blacks, led respectively by the families of the Cerchi and the Donati. The basis of this split was the usual blood-feud between two families. In nearby Pistoia, a family quarrel existed between two branches of the Cancellieri family. The first wife of the original Cancelliere was named Bianca, and her descendants called themselves Whites in her honor. The name of the second wife is not known, but her descendants, in opposition to the Whites, called themselves Blacks. The quarrel erupted into open violence after a murder committed by one Foccaccia (mentioned by Dante in Canto 32 of the *Inferno*).

The Guelphs of Florence, in the interests of maintaining the precarious peace of the district, intervened in the hostilities, and in so doing furthered the jealous rivalry of the Cerchi and the Donati families, who naturally took opposite sides. The city was torn by strife; personal ambitions, feuds, and the arrogance of individuals and families further agitated the situation.

At this point, the Blacks secretly enlisted the aid of Pope Boniface VIII, who intervened in the affairs of the city, largely in his own interest. The pope considered the throne of the empire still vacant, since Albert I had not received his crown in Rome. In his assumed capacity as vicar of the emperor, Boniface plotted to extend the rule of the church over the territory of Tuscany. To accomplish this, he first obtained the favor of the Blacks, then dispatched Charles of Valois, brother of the King of France, to Florence, ostensibly as a peacemaker, but actually as a supporter of the Blacks. In 1302, with the help of Charles of Valois, the Blacks gained control of the city. In the list of some six hundred Whites banished from Florence was the name of the citizen Dante Alighieri.

While the rest of Italy, like Florence, was troubled by rivalries between parties, or by wars of city against city, in Germany the emperor's throne was vacant, first because of an interregnum, then because of a conflict between two rival claimants. The emperor's position was still regarded as vacant by the Italians when the two emperors who followed, Rudolph of Hapsburg and Albert I, failed to come to Italy to be crowned and paid no attention to Italian affairs. Therefore when the news came that Henry of Luxemburg, who succeeded Albert I in 1308, was coming to Italy to oppose King Robert of Sicily, many Italians, for whom Dante was the most eloquent and fervent spokesman, welcomed the prospect with feverish enthusiasm. They saw in the figure of Henry the end of all the woes which had wracked the peninsula.

Henry was crowned at Milan early in 1311. Very soon after, he faced the armed hostility of the opposing party, which had Florence as its leader. Henry, nevertheless, was able to reach Rome and be crowned there in 1312. The coronation took place in the church of St. John Lateran rather than in St. Peter's because the latter was being held by the forces of King Robert of Sicily. The emperor was still fighting to unite the empire when he died in the summer of 1313, succumbing to a fever with suspicious suddenness. The death of Henry put an end forever to the expectations of Dante and all other Italians who had longed for the restoration of the imperial power in Italy.

Dante's theological ideas were strictly orthodox, that is, those of medieval Catholicism. He accepted church dogma without reservation. His best authorities for insight into the more complex problems confronting the medieval thinkers were Augustine, Albertus Magnus, and Thomas Aquinas. He followed the Pauline doctrine of predestination and grace as presented by Augustine, but he managed to bring this into a kind of conformity with free will, to which he firmly adhered. Man has inherited sin and death through Adam's fall, but also hope of salvation through Christ's redemption. God in his love created humans with the power of perceiving good and evil and the opportunity of choosing. On the basis of their choice depended their eternal bliss or damnation. Those who set their will against the divine law were sentenced to Inferno and everlasting torment. Those who sinned but confessed and repented were given their reward in heaven after a period of purifying atonement in Purgatory. Thus repentance, the acceptance of divine law, was the crux of judgment in the afterlife.

Among the familiar tenets of medieval theology, we recognize such concepts as the "seven deadly sins" in Purgatory and the

corresponding seven virtues in Paradise. The doctrine that only those persons who had been baptized as worshipers of Christ were to be admitted to Paradise is expressed in the treatment of the souls in Limbo (*Inferno* 4). Of the many more complex theological concepts expounded through the *Commedia*, explanations will be offered in the textual commentaries.

In castigating the individual popes (and particularly his bitter enemy, Boniface VIII), he was in no way showing disrespect for the *office* of the papacy, for which he held the greatest reverence. He was, in fact, following the long tradition of critics, many of them in high places in the church, who had not hesitated to recall popes to the duties and responsibilities of the chair of Peter. Dante held to the ideal of the papacy and the empire as the dual guardians of the welfare of man, spiritual and secular, each deriving its separate powers directly from God.

Readers cannot fail to recognize Dante's erudition. He appears to have taken all learning for his province, or what passed for learning then. The fact that much of the scientific teaching was hopelessly in error is not Dante's responsibility. The fact that he displayed extraordinary curiosity and avid interest in all branches of scientific learning (geography, geology, astronomy, astrology, natural history, and optics) reveals something important about the poet's mind.

Among the concepts that influenced the plan of the *Commedia* was the belief that only the northern hemisphere of the earth was inhabited, that the southern hemisphere was covered with water except for the mount of Purgatory. The scheme of the heavens was dictated by the Ptolemaic, or geocentric, system of astronomy, upon which Dante based the entire plan of *Paradiso*.

In addition to his thorough and easy familiarity with the Bible, Dante displays a scholar's acquaintance with not only those great theologians previously mentioned (Augustine, Aquinas, etc.) but with a score of others.

Finally, wide reading and absorption of works of *belles lettres*, especially the Latin classics, was of the greatest importance. (Further details will be given later in the discussion of sources of the *Comedy*.)

DANTE'S MINOR WORKS

LA VITA NUOVA

The *Vita Nuova* (*New Life*) is a little book consisting of the love poems written in honor of Beatrice from 1283 to 1292. Written in Italian ("the Vulgar Tongue"), they were collected and linked by a commentary in prose, probably in 1292.

The book of memories and confessions presents a proper introduction to the *Divine Comedy*, as it speaks of a love which, in the mature life, through the path of philosophy and the ascendancy of faith, led the poet to his greatest poetical achievement. However, in the *Vita Nuova* the inspiration comes, without doubt, from reality. Beatrice is not an allegorical creature, but a real woman, smiling, weeping, walking in the street, and praying in the church. From the sincerity of its inspiration, the book derives a note of freshness and originality that is remarkable for that age.

The poems, most of them sonnets and canzoni, are arranged in a carefully planned pattern. These lyrics, like all of Dante's early verses, show the influence of the new school in Bologna, led by Guido Guinizelli, which was identified as *il dolce stil nuovo* (the sweet new style). This group of poets followed the tradition of the poetry of courtly love in certain respects, but developed techniques of greater refinement than their predecessors and treated love in a lofty, spiritual vein.

The prose passages accompanying each poem include not only an account of the circumstances which suggested the writing of the poem but also some analysis of the techniques employed in the construction of the poem, thus giving a unique character to the work.

CANZONIERE

Canzoniere, also in Italian, comprises the collected lyrics other than those included in the *Vita Nuova* and the *Convivio*. Love poems predominate in the collection, some to Beatrice, some to other ladies. The volume includes a group of poems called the "Pietra" lyrics because they were dedicated to a woman "hard as stone." These poems reveal a violent and sensual passion but demonstrate as well experiments in very complicated artistic techniques. There are also exchanges

of poems between Dante and other poets, sometimes complimentary and sometimes caustic and satirical. Other poems in the collection, written during exile, deal with moral and civic doctrine.

IL CONVIVIO

The *Convivio* (the *Banquet*) was written during the exile, possibly in the years 1306-07. The name is metaphorical. Dante means to prepare a banquet of learning and science for such people as princes, barons, knights, and women, who are too busy with civil and social affairs to attend schools and familiarize themselves with scholarship. Such being the aim of the work, Dante employs the vernacular, the common speech, which will benefit a greater number of people, in spite of the fact that in those days Latin was generally required for a learned and scholastic commentary.

According to his original plan, the work was to consist of fourteen chapters, each with a *canzone* and an elaborate prose commentary. Actually only four sections were written, one being the introduction and each of the other three presenting a *canzone* with its commentary.

The two ideas of greatest importance discussed in the *Convivio* are the nobility and the empire. Speaking of the first, Dante maintains that true nobility does not derive from heredity or from the possession of wealth but rather from the practice of virtue. The ideas about the empire, of which Dante here speaks only briefly, were further developed in the *De Monarchia* and in the *Divine Comedy*. However, the secular office of the empire is already seen in the perspective of a divine plan ordained by God for the redemption of man and his betterment in the earthly life.

DE VULGARI ELOQUENTIA

After demonstrating the efficacy of the vernacular in the *Convivio*, Dante made it the subject of a treatise which, being addressed to scholarly people, was written in Latin. The treatise was to consist of four books, but only the first book and sixteen chapters of the second were completed.

The work deals with the origin and the history of languages in general, then attempts a classification of the Italian dialects. The ideal

language is considered to be the “illustrious, vulgar tongue,” a common language for the whole peninsula which would combine the best qualities of the different dialects. To Dante, this ideal seemed to have been attained by the writers of the Sicilian school, and the poets of “the sweet new style” (*il dolce stil nuovo*).

EPISTLES

All of the *Epistles* were written in Latin, and among the thirteen left to us (one of which may be a forgery), the three written to Henry VII on the occasion of his coming to Italy show the same spirit of prophecy which inspires some of the more eloquent passages of the *Divine Comedy*. Dante strongly desired the unification of Italy under Henry's rule and a peaceful Florence to which he could return from exile.

One of the most interesting is that addressed to the six Italian cardinals after the death of Pope Clement V at Avignon. It exhorts the cardinals to elect an Italian pope who will restore the Holy See to Rome. In this letter, as in the *De Monarchia* and the *Divine Comedy*, political and religious problems are closely related. Dante desires not only the return of the popes to Rome but also their peaceful cooperation with the emperors and the moral reformation of the church, then corrupted by simony and avarice.

His letter to Can Grande della Scala outlining the purpose and ideas of the *Comedy* gives the four levels of its interpretation, and serves as an introduction to the work. This letter accompanied some cantos of the *Paradiso*, which Dante dedicated to Can Grande. Boccaccio, in his biography of Dante, relates that the poet was in the habit of writing several cantos of his work, then sending them to Can Grande, his friend and patron.

DE MONARCHIA

The *De Monarchia* states in the most complete manner Dante's views upon the perfect government of human society. Being of universal interest, it was written in Latin, probably during the time Henry was en route to Italy. It was meant to be a warning to the numerous opponents encountered by the emperor on his way to Rome.

Divided into three parts, the book maintains that the empire is necessary for the welfare of mankind because it is the only means of