



ENRICHED
CLASSIC

THE DIVINE COMEDY: INFERNO

DANTE

Includes detailed explanatory notes,
an overview of key themes, and more

THE DIVINE

COMEDY



Dante

Supplementary material written by Frederic Will

Series edited by Cynthia Brantley Johnson



POCKET BOOKS

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

The sale of this book without its cover is unauthorized. If you purchased this book without a cover, you should be aware that it was reported to the publisher as "unsold and destroyed." Neither the author nor the publisher has received payment for the sale of this "stripped book."

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.



POCKET BOOKS, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.
1230 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

Supplementary materials copyright © 2005 by Simon & Schuster, Inc.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce
this book or portions thereof in any form whatsoever.
For information address Pocket Books, 1230 Avenue
of the Americas, New York, NY 10020

ISBN: 1-4165-0023-5

First Pocket Books printing May 2005

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

POCKET and colophon are registered trademarks of
Simon & Schuster, Inc.

Cover art by Marco Ventura

Manufactured in the United States of America

For information regarding special discounts for bulk purchases,
please contact Simon & Schuster Special Sales at 1-800-456-6798
or business@simonandschuster.com

The Inferno:
GIVING THE WORLD HELL



At the beginning of the *Inferno*, we are introduced to a man who could well be our contemporary. In the middle of his life he is lost, conflicted about the direction he should take, and menaced by opponents. A lion, a she-wolf, and a leopard confront him, and he is nearly done for when suddenly a figure appears. It is the Roman poet Virgil, who will be his guide through the dark landscape which lies ahead of him: a voyage through Hell.

The *Inferno*, completed in 1314, is only the first third of Dante's great work, *The Divine Comedy*. In the second and third sections, Dante voyages through Purgatory, and finally to Paradise. While for many readers Dante's first journey is the most interesting, it is useful to remember that in Dante's time the blessings of paradise were the sole justification for Dante's intrepid travels. The three-part structure of *The Divine Comedy* was crucial to Dante's authorial vision, and the focus on the number three, which has great significance in Chris-

tian theology, extended into the smallest details of the work. While this translation is rendered as a prose narrative, the original work is an epic poem, employing a *terza rima* verse structure. Each stanza of the poem consists of three lines, the first and third of which rhyme together, while the middle line rhymes with the first and third lines of the following three-line stanza. Each book of *The Divine Comedy*—*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*—consists of thirty-three roughly coequal cantos which, added together, total ninety-nine cantos. Add the one introductory canto, you have a total of one hundred. This number, ten times itself, was considered “perfect” in medieval mystical thought. The entire poem, therefore, can be seen as an elaborately wrought divine puzzle and an intricately worked prayer to God.

European and American critics of the past century have consistently praised the literary value and lasting human importance of *The Divine Comedy*. However, Dante’s *Commedia* has not always been widely admired. The great German poet Goethe, for example, wasn’t sure what to think. At one point (in Rome, July 1787) he says, “I found the *Inferno* monstrous, the *Purgatorio* ambiguous, and the *Paradiso* boring.” In Italy, the work was virtually forgotten during the nineteenth century, while in European literary circles of the time the *Inferno* was found too coarse, violent, and medieval. It was not until a famous twentieth-century American poet, T. S. Eliot, published his own master work, *The Waste Land* (1922), that appreciation for Dante’s work was rekindled. *The Waste Land*, a modernist poetic masterpiece that examines the “hell” following World War One, bears several similarities to

Dante's *Inferno*, and Eliot, an influential champion of Dante, alludes to *The Divine Comedy* several times in his work. Eliot showed cynical modern readers that the shades, the sinners, and the tormented inhabitants of *The Waste Land* are the direct descendants of the citizens of Dante's Hell—and the brothers and sisters of us all.

The Life and Work of Dante Alighieri

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in the last days of 1265. For parallels to the vitality of that environment we would need to go back to ancient Athens, with its bubblingly vital city-state culture of the fifth century B.C. Mid-thirteenth-century Florence was exploding with political fervor, economic drive, and artistic creativity. Many citizens participated actively in their local government. At the same time, serious rifts appeared in the politics of the city, and the instability of the resulting clashes left many people endangered by swift changes in the political winds—Dante himself was exiled in 1302. But it also sparked a brilliance that contributed lasting beauty and understanding to the growth of modern culture.

Born into a family of medium wealth and recent nobility, Dante seems to have enjoyed a happy enough childhood, with two sisters and a brother. He was carefully educated by both the Dominicans and the Franciscans, two monastic orders founded in the early thirteenth century, famous for the high-quality teaching their monks provided. Dante read widely from youth on, focusing especially on Italian and Provençal

poets. His "first friend" was the poet Guido Cavalcanti, but he was only the first, for Dante plunged vigorously into the vital creative and cultural life of Florence. More than a few of the figures we meet in the *Inferno* were from Dante's immediate circle. He married about 1285, and had two sons and (it has been conjectured) two daughters. In 1289 he took part in his first military campaign, and in 1295 he began to participate actively in city politics. He was involved in governance, in street supervision, and more broadly in resisting those projects of the papacy that infringed on Florentine sovereignty. It was in connection with the latter efforts that Dante, on a mission to Rome, found himself condemned, on trumped-up charges, to banishment and fine, and ultimately to death by burning. From that time on, Dante did not return to Florence. We know only episodes from the last twenty years of his life in banishment, but come away with a picture of ebbing political hopes, close friendships with patrons, and, beyond that, a difficult, intellectually restless life of exile.

Of Dante's life and work, the last thing—the most important thing—to be mentioned is Beatrice, his muse. Dante first saw Beatrice when he was nine and she was eight. Though she would become of utmost importance to his work, he glimpsed her only occasionally from then on up to her death in 1290. Beatrice was real, but also ideal, from the start. Dante identified Beatrice's name and form with the supreme grace of the Virgin Mary, which ultimately calls him to Paradise. Beatrice sheds her influence over the whole *Commedia*, interceding for him in Hell, and sparing and guid-

ing him as he rises through Purgatory to the blinding light of Heaven.

Historical and Literary Context of the *Inferno* and *The Divine Comedy*

Political Turmoil: Florence, the Papacy, and the Empire

Dante's life and city were part of a vastly complex and rapidly changing medieval world of new commerce, proto-nation-states, stretching global frontiers, and new technologies for warfare and labor. The world-political struggle looming around the rapidly developing city of Florence was basically a struggle between the emperors of the Holy Roman Empire and the Papacy. Politics within the city of Florence largely concerned attitudes toward these two major power blocs. In 1266, when Dante was only a few months old, the Church and its Guelf party (the party of the Papacy) won a major battle against the imperialist Ghibellines at the Battle of Benevento. The rulers of the new mercantile cultural Florence were ardent supporters of the Guelf party yet at the same time eager to maintain their independence from the Papacy (no small balancing act, and a political tightrope along which Dante tried to walk).

The historical setting of Dante's Florence would have been sufficiently complex as just described. But the Empire-Papacy split did not allow for easy allegiances, and within the Guelf party, in Florence, there were two factions, the established, aristocratic Blacks

and the newly arrived, mercantile Whites. The Whites, the party to which Dante belonged, were determined to maintain a working balance between Papacy and Empire. The Blacks, on the other hand, were willing to deal with the Church to maintain their own advantage. The exile of Dante, the determinant fact of his spiritual life, derived from his advocacy of the White party.

All of these struggles impinged concretely on Dante's life and work. The *Inferno* is littered with victims of political corruption, fraudulent manipulation, overcivilized vice—and with the moral fortitude of Aeneas, Beatrice, Cato, and the author, figures of ascent and faith. Dante had many temperaments, but he was always a realist. He wrote from his experience of a world in which the greatest secular and religious powers he believed in were fighting one another for both his pocketbook and his soul.

Classical Roman Literature and the Beginnings of Vernacular Literature

To understand the miracle of Dante's artistic achievement, we need to appreciate the matrix from which it was born. Two centuries before Dante began to write, literature in the West was recorded in Latin and based on Roman culture and history. Foremost among the Roman poets, for Dante, was Virgil, whom Dante made his guide through Hell in the *Inferno*. In the *Aeneid* (19 B.C.), which Dante knew by heart, Virgil describes the aftermath of the great Trojan War. Under the leadership of Aeneas, the defeated Trojans sail to Latium, in southern Italy, and found what is to become the Roman Empire, thus to be considered the direct ancestors of

the Italians. Dante revered Virgil for having grasped the seminal importance of Aeneas, the hero of the *Aeneid*, for both the Roman Empire and the Papacy—the two sustaining pillars of Dante's own world—were made possible by the voyage of the Trojans as described in Virgil's epic poem.

Not long after the end of the first millennium, a new, more popular, more localized literature began to emerge from under the shadow of this heritage. Its languages were the forerunners of modern Italian, French, and Spanish—the vernacular—as opposed to Latin, which remained the formal language of law and the Church. This is the literature that forged the tradition of which Dante's work would be part. In both France and Italy courtly poetry was being produced by troubadours, while longer texts were being created by writers of romance. (The *Romance of the Rose*, completed about 1274, was a powerful example of the new imagination.) This literature was fueled by the burst of creative intellectual life then under way. The new universities of France and especially of Italy were making themselves centers of creativity in the arts as well as in science and theology. Meanwhile, the immensely influential texts of Aristotle were being released into the mainstream of Western culture in a series of important translations, and thinkers and spiritualists like Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Thomas Aquinas were inspiring radical new perspectives on human existence.

To all of these new movements Dante was a lively heir, as were his successors Petrarch and Boccaccio, who drove forward the powerful engine of modern Ital-

ian literature. Petrarch (1304–74) brought the sonnet to a new peak, while Boccaccio (1313–75) created, in his ribald *Decameron*, what might be considered the first novel. But it was Dante who truly opened up the new Italian language and made it available to both of these brilliant successors.

CHRONOLOGY OF DANTE'S LIFE AND WORK



- 1265: Dante Alighieri born.
- 1277: Begins study of Latin. He is promised in marriage to Gemma Donati.
- 1283: Writes his first lyrics after his first encounter with ideal true love, Beatrice.
- 1285: Marries Gemma Donati.
- 1287: First child. Dante participates in military campaigns.
- 1290: Beatrice dies.
- 1292: Dante finishes writing the *Vita Nuova*, a lyrical work about his love for Beatrice.
- 1300: Corso Donati, the main figure of the Black Guefts, is banished. Dante is elected one of six priors (governors) of Florence.
- 1301: Dante thought to have been on mission to Pope Boniface VIII.
- 1302: Dante's allegiance to the Whites becomes perilous, as that party is banished from Florence. He is condemned to exile by the Black priorate.

- 1303: Dante lingers in Tuscany, hoping to return to Florence.
- 1304: Composes the *Convivio*, a philosophical work.
- 1307: Visits Paris. Begins work on *The Divine Comedy*.
- 1311: Completes *De Monarchia*, a treatise on government, and *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, defending the use of vernacular languages for serious writings.
- 1312: Meets Emperor Henry VII.
- 1313: Completes the *Inferno*.
- 1321: Dante is guest of Can Grande della Scala at Verona.
- 1317–1321: Resides at Ravenna under patronage of the Count of Polenta.
- 1321: Dies of malaria in Ravenna.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF *Inferno*

- 1215: Guelfs and Ghibellines, warring political factions in Florence, begin a power struggle for control of the city that spans two generations.
- 1273: Thomas Aquinas completes *Summa Theologica*.
- 1274: Edward I crowned king of England at Westminster.
- 1277: Roger Bacon imprisoned for heresy.
- 1280: Kublai Khan founds Yuan Dynasty in China.
- 1281: Pope Martin IV ascends to the Vatican Papacy.
- 1282: In the Sicilian Vespers, the Sicilians rebel against French domination of Sicily, and most of the French on the island are massacred.
- 1284: Genoa defeats Pisa at the Battle of Meloria, initiating its decline.
- 1288: Osman I founds Ottoman Empire.
- 1291: Mamelukes conquer Acre, ending Christian rule in the East.
- 1294: Kublai Khan dies.
- 1296: Frederick II becomes king of Sicily.
- 1297: Genoese defeat Venetians in major sea battle.

- 1299: Treaties are made between Venice and the Turks.
- 1300: Pope Boniface VIII announces Jubilee Year.
- 1301: Boniface sends Charles of Valois and his army to quash anti-Church forces in Florence.
- 1302: First meeting held of French states-general.
- 1306: Robert Bruce crowned king of Scots.
- 1308: Edward II crowned king of England.
- 1312: Henry VII crowned Holy Roman Emperor.
- 1313: Henry VII dies.
- 1316: Edward Bruce crowned king of Ireland.
- 1320: Peace of Paris established between Flanders and France.
- 1322: Battle of Muehldorf fought; Frederick of Austria defeated and taken prisoner by Louis of Bavaria.
- 1325: Aztecs found their capital, Tenochtitlán. It will become Mexico City after the Spanish conquest and subsequent independence of Mexico.
- 1326: Osman I, ruler of Turkey, dies.
- 1327: Edward II, deposed by English parliament, succeeded by Edward III.

CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	vii
CHRONOLOGY OF DANTE'S LIFE AND WORK	xv
HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF <i>Inferno</i>	xvii
THE DIVINE COMEDY: INFERNO	
NOTES	163
INTERPRETIVE NOTES	180
CRITICAL EXCERPTS	187
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION	199
SUGGESTIONS FOR THE INTERESTED READER	201

THE DIVINE COMEDY
INFERNO