

“The Divine Comedy”
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The *Divina Commedia* (Italian for "divine comedy") is Dante's masterpiece and is the best literal expression of medieval culture. The original title of the work (the one Dante gave to it) was simply *Commedia*. [Giovanni Boccaccio](#) suggested adding the adjective *Divina* ("divine") in order both to explain the kind of content and to celebrate the greatness and beauty of the work.

The word *Commedia* indicates the literary genre of the work: Dante himself explains, in his XIII [epistle](#) (addressed to Cangrande della Scala, duke of [Verona](#)) that a *commedia* is a work representing a story with a happy ending (opposite to *tragedia*, Italian for "tragedy", an episode which ends badly): in fact, Dante's *Commedia* ends well, since the protagonist meets God. The *commedia* genre is also characterized by a varied content and style.

Dante's literal models in his writing the *Commedia*, were the Bible and the VI canto of [Virgil's](#) Aeneid. There's also a certain influence by some [Cicero's](#) works (see the [Cicero and Dante](#) page for more info on this). Basically, Dante modified Virgil's pagan vision of after-life, according it to the religious dogmas of the Bible. Moreover, he used [Aristotle's](#) physical vision of Universe and [Thomistic](#) philosophy. The result is a typical medieval vision of the cosmos, based mainly on religious ideals, but considering also classical culture.

Generally speaking, the *Commedia* is an eschatological adventure. In other words, it's the description of Dante's travel through the three transmundane kingdoms: Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*) and Heaven (*Paradiso*). During this imaginary journey, Dante tries to describe the situation of the human souls after their deaths.

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It's difficult to summarize in a few sentences the general plot of the *Commedia*: in fact, the topics are various and changes many times. The unifying elements are the constant presence of some protagonists and the theme of the travel. The whole journey can be also seen as a moral and religious conversion of the protagonist, Dante, symbolizing the conversion of the whole mankind: the result of this conversion is the refuse of sin and a life tensed towards God and eternal bliss.

The protagonists of this travel are three, above all. The first one is Dante himself, symbol of the whole mankind. The second one is Virgil, symbol of human reason. He's Dante's guide through *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*. The third is Beatrice, a woman loved by Dante during his life. In the *Commedia*, she's the symbol of God's love which can help the man to be saved. She guides Dante through *Paradiso*.

Analyzing the first line of the poem and the lines 112-114 of *Inferno*'s XXI canto, we can understand the year in which Dante sets the poem. The journey begins in 1300, on Good Friday, and lasts seven days. Dante has chosen this year because it's a crucial year for him, for Florence and for the whole World. For him, because in this year he becomes *priore*: this political position will be the cause of his exile. For Florence, since in this year the struggles between whites and blacks becomes harder and bloody. For the World, since it's the year of the first jubilee, wanted by pope Bonifacio VIII. The jubilee is a universal call to moral conversion, just like the *Commedia* is an artistical representation of every man's conversion.

The poem is divided into three books, each one representing a kingdom: *Inferno* (see the links page for links to more info about it), *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Each book is composed by 33 cantos, except for the *Inferno*, which has 34 cantos (the first is a general introduction to the

whole poem). So, the *Commedia* is composed by 100 cantos. The cantos are composed by triplets, rhyming with an ABABCBC... scheme (*rima concatenata*). Each verse is 11 syllables long. This uniformity and well-organized structure represent the structure of God's Trinity and reveal the strong religious culture of the author.

The *Commedia* can be read on different levels of meaning. Dante himself says that his work has more than one meaning (*polisignificante*): see the XIII [epistle](#) and the [Convivio](#), II, I, where the poet lists four levels of meaning: the literal one, the metaphorical one, the moral one and the anagogical one.

Dante's main purpose in writing the *Commedia* was to preach the necessity of a moral and religious renew for everybody, in order to get ready for the after-life and to ascend to Heaven, eternally saved. Dante acts as a prophet who speak in behalf of God to the whole mankind. In this sense, he's strongly medieval and his poem is the higher expression of this culture.