

## Author Study

### Objectives

- appreciate the work of a great world poet
- understand the connection between an author's works and his philosophies and beliefs
- learn about medieval life and culture

### Presenting the Author

The **Author Study** offers students the opportunity to concentrate on a masterpiece by Dante Alighieri, one of the greatest writers in the Middle Ages. Students can also learn about Dante's life and get to know the man behind the masterpiece.

### READING FOR INFORMATION

#### Reading Skills and Strategies

#### MONITORING READING STRATEGIES

Encourage students to monitor and modify their reading strategies as they read the **Life and Times** section. For example, students might summarize information in the running text and pay attention to the sequence of events in the time line.

### Dante's Youth and Education

**A** Dante grew up when the Middle Ages were ending and the Renaissance was just beginning. In an age of intense mental activity, Dante spent his youth developing his intellect. He probably attended schools taught by the Franciscans or the Dominicans. Dante also studied under the renowned Florentine teacher, Bruno Latini—a jurist, a politician, and the author of an encyclopedia. Instruction, conducted in Latin, was based on courses in the liberal arts, divided into the Trivium and the Quadrivium. The Trivium included grammar, logic, and rhetoric; the Quadrivium included arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy.

## AUTHOR STUDY

# Dante Alighieri

### OVERVIEW

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*"More can be learned about how to write poetry from Dante than from any English poet."*

—T. S. Eliot

## Italy's Poetic Genius

Dante Alighieri (dān'tā ā'lē-gyē'rē) is widely regarded as the world's greatest poet of ideas. He was not only a learned man but also a keen observer of everyday life. His poem, *The Divine Comedy*, is a monumental work—vast in scope, rich in meaning, and timeless in appeal. Like a medieval cathedral, it is a marvel of construction and detail. In this poem, Dante turned Christian ideas into great literature. One of Dante's countless admirers, the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, once called him "the chief imagination of Christendom."



1265–1321

**SCHOLAR AND PUBLIC SERVANT** Dante was born in the city of Florence, in the west-central Italian region of Tuscany. His father provided him with a fine education in both classical and Christian literature. One of his teachers was Bruno Latini, a Florentine scholar who stressed not only scholarship but the importance of participating in community life. At the age of 18, Dante had taught himself how to write verse. He was influenced by the Florentine poet Guido Cavalcanti, with whom Dante became

friends, encouraged Dante's poetic efforts. Yet, to Latini's teachings, Dante made writing and scholarship secondary to public service. After serving in the army, he pursued a career in politics and diplomacy.

**FLORENCE AND ITS POLITICS** By the time Dante was born, Florence had evolved into a largely independent city-state. Like many other Italian city-states, it had prospered greatly from trade with the Middle East and Asia and the equipping of soldiers for the Crusades. Moreover, Florence had become the banking center of a growing commercial economy that was replacing feudalism in western Europe. As a city-state, Florence was basically self-governing and created its own foreign policy. Nevertheless, it suffered from political conflict that had arisen years earlier in the Holy Roman Empire. The conflict was between the Guelphs (gwělfz), or those who supported the authority of the pope in Rome, and the Ghibellines (gīb'el-nēz), or those who supported the authority of the emperor, usually a German-speaking monarch.



Medieval Florence

## LITERARY Contributions

**Works in Italian** By showing the literary power of the Italian language, Dante inspired writers throughout western Europe to write in their native tongues instead of in Latin. Dante's Italian works include

- *La Vita Nuova* [The New Life]
- *Il Convivio* [The Banquet]
- *La Divina Commedia* [The Divine Comedy], an epic poem in three parts:
  - *Inferno* [Hell]
  - *Purgatorio* [Purgatory]
  - *Paradiso* [Paradise]

**Works in Latin** Like most other educated writers of his day, Dante also wrote in Latin, the language of Church scholarship. His Latin works include

- *De Vulgari Eloquentia* [Concerning Vernacular Eloquence]
- *De Monarchia* [On Monarchy]
- *Eclogae Latinae* (poetry)

732 UNIT FIVE PART 1: LITERATURE OF THE MIDDLE AGES

DANTE AUTHOR STUDY 733

## TIME MANAGEMENT: Teaching Options

If you want to present this lesson as an author study, use all the materials listed under Overview on page 732 in the pupil edition.

If you want to teach only the *Inferno*, use "Preparing to Read" on page 736 and then select one or more of the cantos:

- Canto 1, pp. 737–741
- Canto 3, pp. 742–747
- Canto 5, pp. 748–752
- Canto 34, pp. 753–756

### MINI LESSON

## Using the Time Line

Have students study the time line on pages 732–734 and then answer questions such as the following:

- Could Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* have influenced *The Divine Comedy*? (Yes, Aquinas completed that work about 35 years before Dante began writing *The Divine Comedy*.)
- Approximately how old was Dante when he began writing *The Divine Comedy*? (43)

- Did Dante write *La Vita Nuova* before or after Edward I of England's coronation? (after)
- Which event came first—the end of the Crusades or Dante's exile from Florence? (the end of the Crusades)

## Florence

**B** Few cities can rival Florence, Italy, in importance to western civilization. Florence was the birthplace of the Renaissance, a period of astonishing artistic and intellectual activity. Some of the world's most creative people lived and worked in Florence: writers such as Dante, Boccaccio and Petrarch; painters and sculptors, such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Giotto, and Fra Angelico; the political thinker Machiavelli; and the great astronomer Galileo. In the early 1400s, the Medici family came to power in the city. Under the rule of its most famous member, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Florence reached its pinnacle of glory in the late 15th century.



## Dante's Banishment

**A** It is difficult for modern readers to appreciate how dreadful a punishment exile was in the Middle Ages. A fate almost as grim as death, exile cut the victim off from family and city, removing all means of support. Dante suffered this punishment as a result of party politics. He was a member of the White Guelphs, the party that opposed the Pope and was led by a powerful family, the Cerchi. The rival party, the Black Guelphs, supported the Pope and was led by another powerful family, the Donati. In May of 1300, the two families and their followers fought in the streets of Florence. When the rioting spread, Pope Boniface VIII excommunicated the White Guelph leaders. Dante was one of three ambassadors selected by the White Guelphs to go to Rome on a diplomatic mission to the Pope. While Dante was away from Florence, the Black Guelphs seized control of the city. On January 27, 1302, Dante was tried *in absentia* and found guilty of defying the Pope. He lost all his property and was banished from Florence. According to a contemporary account, Dante learned of his banishment when he reached Siena on his journey home to Florence. He fled for his life and never saw his native city again.

Dante, who supported the Guelphs, fought the Ghibellines in the Battle of Campaldino in 1289.

**POLITICAL LIFE AND EXILE** In 1295, Dante joined Florence's medical guild, which was open to all scholars, and used his membership as a springboard to public office. He rose from city councilman to prior, a high-ranking position, and also served as an occasional ambassador to other Italian city-states. Unfortunately, Florence was again in turmoil. The Guelphs had split into two factions—the Whites and the Blacks. Dante, a White Guelph, sided against the Pope, instead of with him. In 1301, while

**A** Dante was away on a diplomatic mission, the Black Guelphs gained control of Florence. They banished Dante from the city. He spent the rest of his life in exile, mostly at the courts of those sympathetic to the White Guelphs.

**DANTE'S INSPIRATION** Most of Dante's early verse is courtly love poetry, in which the speaker expresses love for an ideal lady out of his reach. Though Dante married Gemma Donati, a woman to whom he had been

betrothed when he was a boy, the object of poetic devotions was a woman named Beatrice—probably Beatrice Portinari, daughter of a Florentine nobleman. According to *La vita nuova*—a collection of his early poems to Beatrice and his accounts of how he came to write them—Dante met Beatrice twice: once when he was nine and again nine years later. Yet in her he saw all that was virtuous, and her untimely death at age 24 broke his heart.

**THE DIVINE COMEDY** Dante wrote his masterpiece, the epic poem *The Divine Comedy*, during his exile. He began the poem around 1308 and finished it shortly before his death in 1321. It consists of three sections: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*. Each section is divided into parts called *cantos* (the Italian word *canto* comes from a Latin word meaning “song”). The cantos, 100 in all, are written in three-line stanzas in a verse form known as *terza rima*, which Dante himself created. To Dante, the number three had deep spiritual meaning. It suggested the divine mystery of the three persons in one God, which is central to Christian belief.



c. 1308 Begins <i>The Divine Comedy</i>	1319 Moves to the court of Guido Novello da Polenta in Ravenna	1321 Completes <i>The Divine Comedy</i> ; dies in Ravenna
1310	1315	1320
1312 Henry VII is crowned Holy Roman Emperor but dies a year later.	c. 1320 The artist Giotto paints frescoes in Florence's Santa Croce chapels.	1325 The Aztecs found their capital, Tenochtitlán, on the site of present-day Mexico City.

## The Divine Comedy: Dante's Dream Vision

This painting by a 15th-century Italian artist was inspired by Dante's masterpiece, *The Divine Comedy*. In the center of the painting, Dante holds a book of his poetry. To his left is the city of Florence, with its domed cathedral. The other scenes show the places Dante visits in the three sections of *The Divine Comedy*: On his right, sinners descend into the terrible pit that is Hell. In the back, sinners try to climb the mountain of Purgatory, which leads to Paradise.



This painting (1465), Domenico di Michelino. Duomo, Florence, Italy. Copyright © Scala/Art Resource, New York.

In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante himself is the main character, a traveler who stands for all of humanity. He first journeys down into the underworld, or Hell, a hideous realm where sinners receive fitting eternal punishments. He then travels to Purgatory, a place of temporary punishment, and finally to Paradise, where he stands before the throne of God. On his journey, Dante encounters characters from mythology, from history, and from his own time—including some of his friends and enemies. The poem, therefore, is not only an imaginative vision of the afterlife but also a rich portrait of medieval times.

When Dante wrote his poem, he gave it the name *Commedia* [comedy] because it ends happily. In time, it became known as *The*

*Divine Comedy* because of its deeply spiritual content. To many readers, the poem suggests the soul's odyssey from the darkness of sin to a glimpse of eternal glory, beauty, and truth.

One of the greatest works in all of literature, Dante's poem was very popular in his own lifetime. According to one commentator, children ran after Dante in the streets to touch the garment of the man who had visited Hell. Down through the centuries, the poem has inspired a host of writers, artists, and musicians.



## The Divine Comedy

**B** Dante's poem is widely regarded as a masterpiece of medieval literature. It is a dream vision that describes Dante's supernatural journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven. His guides on this journey are first Virgil, who represents human reason, and then Beatrice, who represents faith or divine knowledge. The poem is distinguished by its vast learning, its analysis of social problems in medieval Italy, its imaginative power, its spiritual depth, and its magnificent language. Dante wrote this poem in Italian, rather than Latin. Together with Boccaccio and Petrarch, Dante helped to establish Italian as a literary language.

## Literary Influence

**C** Dante influenced countless writers. *The Divine Comedy* and *On Eloquence in the Vernacular* influenced Geoffrey Chaucer when he wrote *The Canterbury Tales* (1386–1400). John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) owed much to Dante. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers as diverse as Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron, Alfred Tennyson, Victor Hugo, Friedrich von Schlegel, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Seamus Heaney acknowledged their debt to Dante.