

English 10

Some background to accompany *Purgatorio*



*La Divina Commedia di Dante*, by Domenico di Michelino, 1465

## Dante

Dante Alighieri (1265–1321); writer in 1307–1308 of the *Divine Comedy* (consisting of three books: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*). Dante wrote not in Latin, as was usual in the Middle Ages, nor in Provençal, which was popular among the generation before him, but in the “vulgar,” Tuscan Italian. He was a Florentine, though he was exiled, and critics make much of his search for a home in the travels of the speaker Dante in *The Divine Comedy*.

Personally, he was inspired by his love for Beatrice, whom he did not marry. Her beauty and virtue inspired his life and his writing.

### 1. How does the geography work?

a. Inferno is underground, below Jerusalem, made by the impact of Lucifer’s fall. Inferno has 1 vestibule + 9 concentric circles.

*Inferno* begins on Maundy Thursday with a 35-year-old Dante, midway on his journey of life.

b. Purgatorio is a mountain, also caused by the impact of Lucifer’s fall.

The story begins at 6 a.m. Easter Sunday in Purgatory, which is antipodal to Jerusalem, where it is 6 p.m. The two east-west points are the Ganges River (where it is midnight) and Spain (where it is noon). Purgatorio is a seven-terraced mountain, the only land in the Southern Hemisphere.

Purgatorio has 2 + 7 + 1 regions.

c. Paradiso is a series of concentric spheres surrounding the earth. Paradiso has 9 + 1 regions.

## 2. What should I look for?

Because the Divine Comedy has allegorical elements, some critics direct you to look for symbolism that works like algebra:  $a = b$ . But the Divine Comedy contains historical figures and works to embody (not just point at) truth. Because the Divine Comedy is great literature, look for symbolism, language, and formal features that are rich and more open. Look for symbolic numbers (the terza rima, the three books, the seven terraces, etc.), symbolic colors, symbolic figures from history, and symbolic elements of setting. Overall, of course, you should also look for larger themes relating to pilgrimage, distance from earthly life, redemption, indulgences (prayers of the living for souls in Purgatory).

## 3. What's up with Virgil?

Some commentators say that Virgil represents reason (and Beatrice, faith). Others have debunked that idea, pointing instead to places where Virgil (and Beatrice, later) shows more dimension than that. He is limited, though, and has to step aside at the end of *Purgatorio*. He's limited by his paganism, but is a good guide for Dante because of their affinities: poetry, Rome, politics.

## 4. How do I read Dante as a character?

Dante appears in the text as a poet, a prophet, and an "everyman." In different places, we will find it profitable to read him different ways. There is certainly an overlap between Dante the man and Dante the speaker, yet we need to keep in mind that tension between any historical figure and his appearance in the text. ("There is always a phantasmagoria," as Yeats says.)

## 5. I want to read more background, but in not the sketchy study aid sources. Where can I look?

Here is a short background of *Purgatorio*, by W.S. Merwin, a respected translator of Dante:  
<http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/m/merwin-purgatorio.html>.

I also enjoy the Digital Dante project of Columbia University (<http://digitaldante.columbia.edu/>) and The Leeds Centre for Dante Studies.

I recommend you read along in more than one translation of the text, so that if the syntax feels wonky in the one you are reading, you can compare and contrast with another. The most noted *Purgatorios* are Ciardi, Musa, Merwin, and Mandelbaum, along with the Esolen.