

**MEDIEVAL EUROPE  
(476-1450): DANTE'S  
DIVINE COMEDY:  
INFERNO (HELL)**



# MEDIEVAL EUROPE (476-1450): DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY: INFERNO (HELL)

## Description

In part 1 of this full analysis of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the images and stories of characters found in the first part of Dante's masterpiece: *Inferno*, including what the different levels represent in terms of sin, why Dante might have chosen the different characters for each level and what overall message medieval Europeans were supposed to get out of reading the piece.

## Subjects

English / Language Arts  
World History  
European History

## Grade Level

11-12

## Duration

90 minutes

## Tour Links

- Duomo of Florence
- Tomb of Dante, Ravenna
- Uffizi Museum, Florence
- Basilica di Santa Croce, Florence
- Dante Statue, Verona

## Essential Questions

- Who was Dante Alighieri? What is the *Divine Comedy*?
- More specifically, what is the story of Part 1: The *Inferno*?
- How does Dante's *Inferno* portray classic medieval visions of Hell and yet at the same time challenges established religious ideas from the time period?

## Academic Summary

“Now let us to the blind world there beneath  
Descend;” the bard began all pale of look:  
“I go the first, and thou shalt follow next.”  
Then I his alter’d hue perceiving, thus:  
“How may I speed, if thou yieldest to dread,  
Who still art wont to comfort me in doubt?”  
He then: “The anguish of that race below  
With pity stains my cheek, which thou for fear  
Mistakest. Let us on. Our length of way  
Urges to haste.” Onward, this said, he mov’d;  
And ent’ring led me with him on the bounds  
Of the first circle, that surrounds th’ abyss.  
Here, as mine ear could note, no plaint was heard  
Except of sighs, that made th’ eternal air  
Tremble, not caus’d by tortures, but from grief  
Felt by those multitudes, many and vast,  
Of men, women, and infants. Then to me  
The gentle guide: “Inquir’st thou not what spirits  
Are these, which thou beholdest? Ere thou pass  
Farther, I would thou know, that these of sin  
Were blameless; and if aught they merited,  
It profits not, since baptism was not theirs,  
The portal to thy faith. If they before  
The Gospel liv’d, they serv’d not God aright;  
And among such am I. For these defects,  
And for no other evil, we are lost;  
Only so far afflicted, that we live  
Desiring without hope.” So grief assail’d  
My heart at hearing this, for well I knew  
Suspended in that Limbo many a soul  
Of mighty worth. “O tell me, sire rever’d!  
Tell me, my master!” I began through wish  
Of full assurance in that holy faith,  
Which vanquishes all error; “say, did e’er  
Any, or through his own or other’s merit,  
Come forth from thence, whom afterward was blest?”

*Dante Alighieri, Divine Comedy: Inferno, Canto IV, translated by Henry Francis Cary, 1814*

The Roman Catholic Church was the most powerful institution in Europe during the medieval period. With over 90% of Europe’s population living and dying as illiterate serfs, all most people had to look forward to on a daily and weekly basis was the idea that if they lived their lives according to the dictates of the Church that they could somehow earn their way into Heaven through God’s mercy. Consequently, failing to follow the teachings of the Church would earn one a trip to Hell. Medieval churches were built and decorated around this theme. With the vast majority of Christians unable to read or speak Latin, the official language of the Church, visual images became the principal means of teaching the population. Medieval churches were often adorned with a series of frescoes depicting in vivid detail visions of heaven, purgatory

and hell. Images of suffering started once the congregation entered the church and ended with visions of paradise behind the altar. The message was simple. Only through the Church could one achieve salvation. This was the world into which Dante Alighieri was born.

Born in Florence in 1265, Dante (as he is generally known today) was one of the leaders of the so-called “Dolce Stil Novo” movement, which sought to bring love, noble-mindedness and an intellectual use of metaphors to poetry. Writing in the vernacular of 13th century Italian, Dante’s work is considered by scholars to have ennobled the Tuscan dialect, the precursor of the Italian language of today. His work is so important to their national sense of self that modern Italians simply refer to Dante as “il Poeta” (the Poet) as though there was no other before him and those who have come after him have been merely poor imitations.

Sometime between 1305 and 1321 (the exact date is unclear), Dante composed *Divina Comedia* (the *Divine Comedy*), a poem now widely considered the preeminent work of Italian literature and also one of the masterpieces of world literature. The long epic, consisting of over 14,000 lines broken up into three parts, uses the literary technique of allegory to tell the story of Dante’s journey through the bowels of Hell, the transitional realm of Purgatory, and the paradise of heaven. Deliberately using symbolic figures and imagery, each character and place in the poem is nonetheless real in the minds of its readers. Each part of the story is then broken up into 9 separate levels.

In Hell, a pit underground carved out when Lucifer fell from Heaven, inhabitants are punished in different ways, each one worse than the next, depending on the sins they committed while on earth (using Dante’s discretion; perhaps not in the modern sense). The first circle of Hell (called Limbo) is for virtuous non-sinners who did not know Christ (such as Virgil), placed there by God since they cannot enter Heaven, a blatant homage to the idea that only through the Church could one be saved. Along the way down, Dante sees the sins of lust and gluttony as much more benign than those of heresy, fraud and treachery. Interestingly, upper levels of Hell are hot, while Satan’s lair, in the center of the Earth, is cold, exactly opposite as pictured by many believers today. Lucifer in the poem has three heads and sits waist deep in ice, with each of his mouths chewing on a prominent historical traitor: Judas (who betrayed Jesus), and Brutus and Cassius (who both betrayed Julius Caesar).

In purgatory, symbolized by a mountain rising from the Earth in the southern hemisphere exactly opposite from Jerusalem on the globe, nine levels of pain and suffering await the souls sentenced here by God (many of whom would have been easily recognizable to medieval readers), but there is a way out. Only through the purging of specific sins from their souls can Christians hope to pass from one terrace to the next.

When a soul was fully cleansed of its sins, thus achieving a state of grace, he or she was ready to enter paradise. One’s ultimate eternal resting place was one of the levels of Heaven, where a person’s placement on a specific level was done according to that person’s position on Earth when they were alive. According to Dante, paradise physically consists of spheres surrounding the Earth, an idea roughly corresponding to medieval notions of a geocentric model for the universe. During his travels through the different spheres of Heaven, Dante sees rulers such as the Byzantine emperor Justinian, philosophers such as Bede and Aquinas, and warriors of the faith such as Cacciaguida (Dante’s great-great grandfather who fought in the Second Crusade). As he progresses along his journey, Dante meets different people such as popes, political leaders and saints who “converse” with him along the way. These characters are specifically designed to give readers a sense of familiarity with the text, as they

would have been well known to 14th century Europeans, but there is also a much deeper meaning to each of the images the poet sees in the different levels. The poet is taken through each stage by a guide. Virgil, traditional ranked as one of Ancient Rome's greatest poets and a figure well known to medieval academics, serves as Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory, but not Heaven. Since Virgil's life (70 BCE to 19 BCE) predated the birth of Christianity however, his soul in the story is not allowed to enter the gates of Heaven (another message that only through Jesus – or Jesus's church – could one enter paradise). Dante's guide through the levels of Heaven is Beatrice, a real woman who Dante loved in Florence and who he sees as the personification of God's love and perfection.

The three parts of Dante's *Divine Comedy* were (and are) designed to be read consecutively. In the end, readers in the 14th century were being given a "road map" to heaven. If one followed the examples of the souls in Heaven, one could hope to achieve their just rewards. On the other hand, if one followed the examples of those souls in Hell or Purgatory, then one could expect pain and suffering as punishment, whether for specific time (as in purgatory) or for eternity (as in Hell). Modern readers still study Dante's work, perhaps not for its roadmap on how to get to Heaven, but because it also shows a keen insight into the mindset of Christians in medieval European society towards their faith and in the Church's role in getting them to Heaven. As St. Cyprian of Carthage, an early Church father, had written in the 3rd century (and as the Roman Catholic Church had upheld for centuries after the fall of Rome), "*Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*" (*outside the Church there is no salvation*). Dante's greatest literary work exemplifies that sentiment.

In Part 1 of this full analysis of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, through an in-depth analysis of various primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the images and stories of characters found in the first part of Dante's masterpiece: *Inferno*, including what the different levels represent in terms of sin, why Dante might have chosen the different characters for each level and what overall message medieval Europeans were supposed to get out of reading the piece.

## Objectives

1. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the images and levels of Part 1 of Dante's 14th century poem *Divine Comedy: Inferno*.
2. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain the how the images and stories found in Dante's version of Hell were designed around the medieval idea that only through the Roman Catholic Church could salvation be achieved.
3. Students will identify, analyze, understand and be able to explain how the images and stories found in Dante's version of Hell criticized the medieval Roman Catholic Church as an institution and/or specific people within the Church.

# Procedures

## I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: How do writers use the technique of allegory to help tell a story and/or give a message to their readers? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of the primary sources and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

## II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Brief overview of Dante's *Inferno*. (20 min)
- Video – Dante's Visionary Descent into Hell (10 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the sources and articles Dante's *Divine Comedy: Inferno*. (20 min)
- Suggestion: AP/advanced students should read Dante's *Inferno* full text (translated) over the course of multiple days.
- Suggestion: the "Links" section below contains a worksheet packet to help students understand the different levels of the Inferno
- Group Activity – Socratic Discussion: Identify and explain the images and stories of characters found in the first part of Dante's masterpiece: *Inferno*, including what the different levels represent in terms of sin, why Dante might have chosen the different characters for each level and what overall message medieval Europeans were supposed to get out of reading the piece. (20 min)

## III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay / DBQ: Explain in detail the images and stories of characters found in the first part of Dante's masterpiece: *Inferno*, including what the different levels represent in terms of sin, why Dante might have chosen the different characters for each level and what overall message medieval Europeans were supposed to get out of reading the piece.

# Extension

## On tour: Duomo (Cathedral) of Florence

While on tour, students in Florence will visit the Duomo (Cathedral) where they can see for themselves the most famous image of Dante and his *Divine Comedy*. On the west wall of the cathedral, students will see Michelino's painting *La Commedia Illumina Firenze (the Comedy Illuminating Florence)*, showing Dante and his famous poem. Famous statues of Dante also can be found outside the Uffizi Museum and in the Piazza di Santa Croce in Florence as well. Inside the Basilica di Santa Croce, where many famous Florentines including Michelangelo, Galileo and Machiavelli are buried, there is an empty tomb dedicated to Italy's most famous poet. Dante was exiled from Florence in 1301 and spent the last years of his life in Ravenna, dying there in 1321. He is buried in the Church of St. Francis. In 1829, the city of Florence tried to get the poet's bones transferred to Santa Croce, but to no avail. They remain in Ravenna to this day.

# Web Links

## Lesson Plan Websites

- [www.divinecomedy.org/divine\\_comedy.html](http://www.divinecomedy.org/divine_comedy.html)  
Research Edition of the Divine Comedy (primary source) – from the Electronic Literature Foundation
- [www.worldofdante.org/resources.html](http://www.worldofdante.org/resources.html)  
Teacher Resources for the World of Dante (website) – great starting point for all things Dante
- [www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/dante/comedy.pdf](http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/dante/comedy.pdf)  
The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri, translated by HF Cary (primary source) – full text PDF of the Divine Comedy from Jim Manis, Faculty Editor at Penn State University
- [historylists.org/art/9-circles-of-hell-dantes-inferno.html](http://historylists.org/art/9-circles-of-hell-dantes-inferno.html)  
9 circles of Hell -- Dante's Inferno (website)
- [www.ljhs.sandi.net/faculty/clecren/world/unit6/InfernoPacket.pdf](http://www.ljhs.sandi.net/faculty/clecren/world/unit6/InfernoPacket.pdf)  
Worksheet packet on Dante's Inferno. From Carole LeCren, English teacher from La Jolla high School (CA) – highly recommended for students and teachers.
- [www.slideshare.net/arlene5162/divine-comedy-presentation](http://www.slideshare.net/arlene5162/divine-comedy-presentation)  
Divine Comedy (PowerPoint) – from Centro Escolar University (Philippines)
- [www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1](http://www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1)  
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fh04bxcsgU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3fh04bxcsgU)  
Dante's Visionary Descent into Hell (video) – 10-minute video. Originally part of the BBC's "Circles of Light" documentary from 1995.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUYXGB8Uk4M](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tUYXGB8Uk4M)  
Gnosis – Dante, the Divine Comedy Interpretations (video). This 50-minute video is perhaps too long for most in-class showings, but it is worth it. Highly recommended for both students and teachers who want to understand more about all 3 parts of Dante's most famous work.
- [www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGsuTJUL57Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGsuTJUL57Q)  
Dante Alighieri: The Divine Comedy (video) – 37-minute academic video that uses a PowerPoint to explain Dante's most famous work.

## Background Information

- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dante\\_Alighieri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dante_Alighieri)  
Dante Alighieri – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine\\_Comedy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_Comedy)  
Divine Comedy – Wikipedia article
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferno\\_\(Dante\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferno_(Dante))  
Inferno (Dante) – Wikipedia article
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/Florence](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/Florence)  
On the Road: Florence – from Passports Educational Travel
- [passports.com/group\\_leaders/on\\_the\\_road/italy/florence\\_sightseeing](http://passports.com/group_leaders/on_the_road/italy/florence_sightseeing)  
On the Road: Florence Sightseeing – from Passports Educational Travel

## Other Relevant Passports Lesson Plans

- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-  
tales](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/medieval-britain-chaucer-canterbury-tales)  
Medieval England – Geoffrey Chaucer: Canterbury Tales
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/england/magna-carta-of-1215)  
Medieval England – Magna Carta 1215
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/france/medieval-france-avignon-papacy)  
Medieval France – The Avignon Papacy 1309-1378
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-renaissance-venice-the-doge)  
Medieval / Renaissance Venice - The Doge: Merchant Rulers of the Republic
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-europe-black-death-of-1348)  
Medieval Europe – Bubonic Plague 1348
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-inferno](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-inferno)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Inferno
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-paradiso](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-paradiso)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Paradiso
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/dante-purgatorio)  
Medieval Europe – Dante's Purgatorio
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-basilica-di-san-marco)  
Medieval Venice – Basilica di San Marco
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-  
travels](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-marco-polo-and-his-travels)  
Medieval Venice – Marco Polo
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/italy/medieval-venice-fourth-crusade)  
Medieval Venice – Fourth Crusade
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/spain/al-andalus-islamic-spain)  
Al-Andalus – Islamic Spain 711-1492
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-  
1054](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-great-schism-of-1054)  
Great Schism of 1054 – Catholic vs. Orthodox
- [www.passports.com/lesson\\_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-  
constantinople-1453](http://www.passports.com/lesson_plans/turkey/byzantine-istanbul-fall-of-constantinople-1453)  
Byzantine Istanbul – Fall of Constantinople 1453

## Key Terms

- Allegory
- Boniface VIII
- Dante
- *Divine Comedy*
- Florentine
- Medieval
- Virgil



