



Dante's *Divine Comedy*

In 1321, Dante Alighieri completes the final cantos of the *Comedy* and breathes his last. After 700 years, the *Comedy* has not finished saying what it has to say. This course provides an in-depth introduction to Dante's masterwork as a point of entry to the history of medieval literature, philosophy, and science. The core of the course consists of an intensive study of Dante's encyclopedic poem in relation to the culture and history of Medieval Europe. We examine the poem as both a product and an interpretation of the world it describes. We also observe how the *Comedy* casts its long shadow on modern culture: for instance, in Primo Levi's description of the horror of Nazi concentration camps, or in Amiri Baraka's fragmentary representation of America's infernal racist system. We investigate the challenges that Dante's text elicits when it migrates to visual and cinematic arts (from medieval illuminations to Robert Rauschenberg to David Fincher), continuously camouflaging and adapting to different media. Major topics of this course include: representations of the otherworld; the soul's relation to the divine; Dante's concepts of governance and universal peace; mythology and theology in Dante's Christian poetics; the role of the classics in the Middle Ages; intertextuality and imitation; genres and genders in medieval literature; notions of authorship and authority during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; the culture and materiality of manuscripts in the Middle Ages; and the reception of Dante's work from the fourteenth century to the present. *** *Fear not! Course conducted in English. No previous knowledge of Italian required.*

Course Objectives

1. Read a medieval text in its historical and cultural context
2. Develop skills in analyzing the structure, themes, and ideas of a pre-modern literary work
3. Investigate the literary system of the late Middle Ages
4. Incorporate notions related to the dynamics of writing and reading in manuscript culture into the understanding of pre-modern texts
5. Develop the ability to construct coherent critical arguments concerning the form and content of a literary text, and the ability to understand and respond critically to arguments put forward by others
6. Develop close reading skills and construct arguments supported by textual or contextual evidence
7. Develop communication skills and the ability to interact with others effectively while discussing topics related to literary works
8. Start a Dante cult at Penn

Bibliography

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *Vita Nova (The New Life)* – any unabridged edition (ed. A. Frisardi, recommended; ed. M. Mousa; ed. Ch. Norton).

DANTE ALIGHIERI, *The Divine Comedy* – any complete edition of the three canticles (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso*) with commentary (eds. R. M. Durling and R. L. Martinez, recommended; ed. R. Hollander; ed. Ch. Singleton).

*** All other texts will be made available through Canvas.

Course Assignments

Course Citizenship: Preparation, Attendance, Participation (20%)

You are expected to arrive in class on time having closely read the texts assigned for that week. Be an active reader: Make notes, underline and circle words and phrases: in short, be an active reader. Complete the reading before each session. Read and be prepared to respond to the discussion questions. Arrive with a handful of points for discussion. Bring your reading notes to class.

Response Papers (15% + 15%)

Two pieces of analytical prose (4-5 pages each, double-spaced) that cover class discussions and readings (primary *and* secondary texts) will be assigned during the semester.

Oral Presentation (10%)

A brief (12 minutes) in-class presentation on a single canto of *Purgatorio* or *Paradiso*. This will include a synopsis of the canto, the collocation of the canto within the moral and literary architecture of the *Comedy*, the presentation of major figures appearing in the canto, the analysis of major events occurring in the canto. Guidelines on the course Canvas. In order to assign cantos and dates, we will appeal to cleromancy and cast lots accordingly. Presentations will start mid-October. A calendar will be made available on Canvas by the end of September.

In-Class Midterm Exam (15%)

The test—on *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*—will ask critical questions regarding plots, characters, and other basic matters of comprehension.

Digital Dantethon (25%)

A multimedia project that playfully reworks a segment of the *Comedy* in contemporary terms, to be presented to the class during the Digital Dantethon. This will be one of the highlights of the semester: an in-class competition for the most imaginative *Comedy* inspired project. Projects will be developed in teams of three-four students, working in consultation with me, and may make use of digital platforms and/or social media. Projects may be philological, satirical, comic, or political in character, but, however humorous or playful, must demonstrate a substantial engagement with Dante's text and the questions it confronts. **Project will be presented during Finals Week (date TBD).** The ceremony for the Bedeviled Dante Prize for the best student project is scheduled for the same day.