

## **An Annotated Syllabus and Detailed Assignment Descriptions**

**Daniel E. Christian, Gilman School, Baltimore, MD**

Winner, 2017 [Robert M. Durling Prize](#) for excellence in the teaching of Dante's life, time, and works by educators working in North American secondary schools, awarded by the Dante Society of America

**Instructor:** Daniel E. Christian

**Education:** St. Ambrose College, Davenport, Iowa, B. A.  
in Theology/History, 1976.  
St. Mary's Seminary and University, Baltimore, Maryland,  
M. A. in Theology, 1983

**Teaching Experience:** Newman Central Catholic High School, Sterling,  
Illinois, 1976-1977  
Delone Central Catholic High School, McSherrystown,  
Pennsylvania, 1977-1979  
Alleman High School, Rock Island, Illinois, 1979-1980  
Gilman School, Baltimore, Maryland, 1980-present

**Classroom:** CT-06

**Office:** Carey Hall at Gilman School, CT-07

**Office Hours:** Available by appointment or by "incidental contact"

**Phone:** 410-323-3800 x752

**Email:** [dchristian@gilman.edu](mailto:dchristian@gilman.edu)

**Class Times:** Even Days, 9:25-10:35, "Bump" Day 3, 1:30-2:10

**Students eligible:** Seniors from Gilman School, The Bryn Mawr School and Roland Park Country School/Adult auditors welcome upon request

**Class Size:** Eighteen (unless adjusted)

**Required Materials:** "Inferno"/"Purgatorio"/"Paradiso" by Dante Alighieri (trans. by Allen Mandelbaum), *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis, *The Passionate Intellect* by Barbara Reynolds (to be checked out of our Gilman library for the entire semester), *"The Meaning of Heaven and Hell"* by Dorothy L. Sayers, *"The Meaning of Purgatory"* by Dorothy L. Sayers (available in our Gilman library as well).

**Course Description:** C. S. Lewis asserts near the end of his *A Grief Observed*, "a shattering and disarming simplicity is the real answer." Within that spirit this course will work. We will read Dante's *Comedy* and do our best to let his story "read

us.” Our grounding principle will be rooted in an observation made by literary critic, Anne Fadiman, who said once that the difference between a READER and someone who just reads is that “whenever an author writes anything, she extends a hand out to the world. Someone who just reads barely notices the hand, but a READER not only sees the presented hand but eagerly takes it and squeezes back.” During this semester, we will search carefully for Dante’s proffered hand and do our very best to “squeeze back” with attention and careful, respectful firmness.

**Format:** Our course will be conducted in a traditional seminar format. We will let Dante’s story be the energy that drives our discussion. Basically, every other day, we will walk and talk with Dante. That will be a full-course meal for hungry “fellow pilgrims on the road.”

**Notebooks:** Taking notes is what paying attention looks like in school. Therefore, in this course, students will be required to be thoughtful, thorough “note-makers.” To that end, students must bring a hardback, three-ring binder, one that is user-friendly for both the student and for me. Notebooks will be collected and graded twice a semester. Presented notebooks should be ones that the student is proud to sign as her own.

**Course Trajectory: Day one--** We begin class by presenting the basics on how class will “work.” The students are given a “Work Due (Do)” bulletin with a list of reading/writing assignments for the first ten-day cycle. At the bottom of the page I offer a “Keen-Note Address,” a passage from writer, Sam Keen, which provides rich intellectual inspiration for our journey [In 1996, I invited Sam Keen to speak at our school and then spend a morning with our Dante class. We talked about the power of “moving from unconscious myth to conscious autobiography.” With those ideas in mind, we came to appreciate that the *Comedy* is the account of Dante’s own “mythic journey.” It was a very, very special few days for us!!]. I then hand out a “Things to Ponder” packet. “Letting Dante READ US” is introduced. In addition to that idea, I also challenge the students to consider that EVERY GOOD EXPERIENCE SHOULD BEGIN AND END IN MUSIC. To honor that statement, I play the kids two tone-setting pieces of music: 1) “Looking for Space” by John Denver, and 2) “Angels” by a local folk group, *Terra Nova*. Denver challenges us to “look to the center,” and “Angels” wants us to “stay on the lookout for someone bearing light.” The connection with Dante is certainly clear with his canto structure and his regular use of Psalms, but I also incorporate music as a means of helping the students read the *Comedy* well, music as an additional lens, so to speak. Music is a main component of the final exam, but also, and, perhaps more importantly, the students respond over the course of the semester to four pieces of music by folk musician/humanitarian, Harry Chapin. As our journey proceeds, I ask them to think about and then respond in writing to the following: How would this particular piece of music have benefitted a person in Dante’s story at a spiritual/personal “crunch time” moment for him/her? These Dante/Chapin discussions are often provocative and the subsequent writing especially powerful. One year (2006) the papers were so very strong that I decided to edit them and then create a mini-anthology. The goal was to share some

interesting high school Dante writing with the proceeds being evenly split between *The Dante Society of America* and *The Harry Chapin Foundation*. It was just a blast to create, and I was very pleased with the final result. The sales were strong!

### [#3- Dante/Harry Chapin Anthology](#)

**Day two and beyond...** The second and third class days are devoted to a close reading of *A Grief Observed* by C. S. Lewis. Reading it gives the students a powerful experience of “beginning again” (Sam Keen) while also providing an account of a short, yet potent journey from Hell to Heaven, also spawned, in part, by the death of a Beloved. What’s especially cool and relevant is that Lewis chooses to end his memoir with a passage from Dante’s “Paradiso,,” “poi si torno all eterna fontana.” Dante truly is EVERYWHERE!! With the hope of honoring the reading experience, I then refer the students to a line from the documentary, “Stone Reader,” when author, Dow Mossman, tells film-maker, Mark Moskowitz, that “as long as my book is somewhat alive in you (emphasis mine), I couldn’t ask for anything more.” Now that we know books are “alive,” I ask the students to read closely, looking for moments that “PULSE.” Once they do, they write two papers (two pages in length) where they explain how the moments are important to those in the reading and how they are significant to themselves, how the PULSE MOMENTS “read them.”

After *Grief*, we move right on into the *Comedy*. We spend little time on historical context; the notes in our edition offer enough of that kind of information. Honoring the story is how we begin. I tell them, since it is likely their first time with Dante, to read it just like they would read a novel. Imagery/dialogue/character development—It’s all there. In addition, I ask the students to become strong “marginalia creators.” They are required to choose three PULSE moments per assignment and write a five-sentence response in the margins of the text (if they prefer, they can use elongated Post-It Notes on the relevant pages).

### [#4- Student Marginalia #1](#)

In the reading, I challenge the students to focus a hard eye on the multi-faceted relationship between Dante/Pilgrim and Virgil. While they will most certainly encounter varying degrees of loaded moments in the story, if the students only attended to how the pilgrim and Virgil grow together, they would have before them a full “reading plate.”

As a complement to reading the first five cantos of “Inferno,” I require that the students read thoroughly one of two secondary articles by Dorothy L. Sayers, “*The Meaning of Heaven and Hell*” (“*The Meaning of Purgatory*” will be assigned at the appropriate time later in the semester). While very challenging for them (we meet on Sunday evenings to discuss these), this piece gives the students a wonderful understanding of the intellectual fundamentals of the *Comedy*.

### [#5- Student Marginalia #2](#)

In addition to these two articles, we read selected chapters, once every ten days, from The Passionate Intellect by Barbara Reynolds. This wonderful book beautifully captures how Dante entered Sayers's life and how that "new life" became an essential component to Sayers's professional work as well as to her inner life. No other secondary materials are used in this course, except that each student must read one entry from The Dante Encyclopedia. Certainly the amount of critical material on Dante is voluminous and often very interesting, yet I want the students to have a clean, uncluttered first experience of meeting Dante's story albeit in translation. I'd rather they be challenged and frustrated by the real thing than have a "false positive" sense from depending on other people's reading. What I stress is that reading Cliff's Notes is like visiting Busch Gardens and thinking you have been to Europe. No. It's Virginia!!

After passing through the Gates of Hell, the students are taught how "contrapasso" functions for Dante. What seems to be especially helpful is a comment by Dorothy L. Sayers in describing Dante's system of punishments where she argues that the "people in Hell are not punished for their sins but rather by them"(emphasis mine). I also give them a geographical breakdown of Hell, Upper and Lower. With these ideas clearly presented, we dive into "Inferno" 5 since the events there set the stage for the pilgrim's future damned encounters. An interesting exercise after reading "Inferno" 5 is to have the students read "the severe mercy" letter written by C. S. Lewis and quoted in Sheldon Vanauken's A Severe Mercy. The students are asked to imagine that if Paolo and Francesca had read this letter just before they began their failed study date, how it might have interrupted the trajectory of their demise. Essentially, this exercise provides the students with an early opportunity to reflect on the struggle addressed in Dante's story regarding "getting one's loves in order."

The remainder of our "Inferno" Unit, due to time limitations, consists of reading "Inferno" 10-15, 26, 32-34. (The last twenty-five years or so, we have been trying to create room in the semester to spend more and more meaningful time climbing Mt. Purgatory, and, especially, at moving purposefully towards the Heavenly Rose where we will attain a glimpse of the BIG LIGHT). Mostly, we hit the highlights (lowlights!) of the damned experience. Our focus is on how each damned person reveals his "DAMNED-ABILITY" in the telling of his story. Thanks to Sayers's emphasis on "subsisto," we can ponder how damnation, at its core, is about the perversion of one's "I am-ness." As the students travel with the Pilgrim down and down the hellish funnel, an "empty concavity" (Jeffrey Schnapp), they are challenged to see how the shape of Hell symbolically reveals the ultimately cramped, choked reality of the damned soul; the self-absorbed grandeur of Ulysses and Count Ugolino, for example, paints perfect pictures of infernal "BIG PEOPLE/SMALL SELVES."

Once we are able to "once again see the stars," we begin to read and to "climb" Mt. Purgatory. I try to emphasize the contrast that Dante/Poet creates

between Hell and Purgatory. The “freshness” is incredible (“oriental sapphire;” Wow!). Once we are acclimated somewhat to the vibrant, invigorating atmosphere, we focus our attention, first, on the still-devoted, yet significantly altered Virgil at the base of the mountain, one who stammers while talking with Cato. The depth of Professor Hollander’s observation sadly begins to ring true, that Virgil embodies the “tragedy of the *Comedy*.” Virgil is right on target, though, when he asserts that the Pilgrim “goes seeking liberty.” That idea of freedom pervades our discussion of the hard-working Purgatorians (freedom from as well as freedom to). At this time, to function as a “freedom aide,” I emphasize for the students a definition of freedom I learned from a talk by Poet/Dante translator, John Ciardi: “freedom is learning to move easily in harness.” Grappling with Casella’s arrival in light of this idea is especially fruitful for the students (In particular, Ciardi helps clarify the serendipitous encounter later in the climb with Statius, who just happens to experience his “[free] will being surprised to ascend to a higher threshold” right as the Pilgrim is studying the avaricious terrace where Statius has spent his many years reviving his personal “subsisto.”

On a consistent basis, our strongest discussions about “Purgatorio” are generated by our reading about the healing work accomplished specifically on the terraces of Purgatory Proper. After looking closely at the “transfer of authority” moment between Virgil and St. Lucia outside of the Purgatory Gate (William Blake’s breathtaking depiction is extremely powerful), we first focus our attention on the Terrace of the Proud. The fact that Dante/Poet establishes a symmetrical balance on each of the seven terraces facilitates well the dynamic personal encounters readers witness as the Pilgrim works his way up the mountain. Terrace #1 powerfully generates two special things the students are asked to notice: 1) the small moment described in Canto Ten when Virgil invites/challenges the Pilgrim to “move past him” in order for him to see the “bigger picture” creatively revealed through the reliefs (“*visibile parlare*”) which portrays poignantly the changing relationship between Virgil and Dante (Over the years I’ve come to identify these kinds of occasions as DNA moments, “in the little is the BIG”). The picture painted by Dante/ Poet here in this small scene captures perfectly the student-teacher-coach-parent relationship at its complicated best. We WANT them to “go past us.” Our lives are just that easy yet just that challenging as well; 2) the possible common thread(s) running through the three stories carved in the rock [constituting the “Whip”] that inspire readers to ponder the true meaning of Humility. In particular, I love to ask the students to note that the grieving widow essentially “speaks truth to power” in her encounter with Trajan (a powerful moment honoring Quaker tradition!!). After thinking hard about destructive Pride and healthy Humility, we move to the Terrace of Envy. Guido del Duca’s challenge to humankind is packed with discussion potential: “Why do you set your sights where sharing can’t have a part?” This conversation naturally segues perfectly into “Virgil’s First Discourse on Love.” As a musical complement, I play the students “Herr Mueller” by *Terra Nova*, a song fashioned from a short story found in [Hasidic Tales of the Holocaust](#). It tells the tale of two friends/acquaintances whose lives move in drastically different directions, yet a surprise moment of contagious love, a love rooted in clean, human

recognition, changes everything. As we continue following the sun up the mountain, under the same time constraints we faced with “Inferno,” we first discuss Dream #2 by focusing on the following issue and subsequent question: The old adage asserts, “love is in the eye of the beholder.” After experiencing Dante’s “Dream of the Siren,” what do you now think of that traditional understanding of love? [Coincidentally, back in 2011, the slothful terrace became the context for a very special and unique experience for our Dante class. During the previous summer, on July 16<sup>th</sup>, I had travelled to Huntington, NY, to volunteer at a Harry Chapin family concert, honoring the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Harry’s death. I decided the next day I would visit Brooklyn for the first time ever, and I spent the evening listening to Jen Chapin, Harry’s daughter, perform at a small, yet well-known venue. At intermission, we began talking about school, music and other things. We decided that it might be interesting and meaningful for her band to visit our school and conduct an intimate performance/workshop for and with our Dante class (plus other curious students). Four months later, they arrived (they left Brooklyn at 4:00 a.m.!) early, and they kept everyone spell-bound for about an hour. Music and Dante student questions were at the heart of our time together, perfect because those two things are the glue that holds us onto the journey.]

### **[#6- Jen Chapin Trio Dante Workshop](#)**

Next comes our discussion of Statius’s awakening. So many key ideas surface through this encounter that it is hard to choose where to place our sharpest focus. Mostly we talk about how the *Aeneid* was “both mother and nurse” for Statius. It’s critical that the students note the parental character of literature as well as appreciate the “grace under pressure” displayed by Virgil while in the presence of Statius, who owes Virgil “big-time,” yet surpasses him in a universe Dante offers us, one filled with the unpredictable operations of grace. UGH!!

To punctuate the “Purgatorio” reading experience, we focus our attention closely on Dante/Pilgrim’s meeting with Beatrice with particular emphasis on Beatrice’s insistence that the Pilgrim undergo “a searching and fearless moral inventory” as taught to us by Step #4 from “Alcoholics Anonymous” (From Day #1, I ask the students to consider the idea that all of us, in differing degrees, but true nonetheless, are in RECOVERY. The 12-Steps can be a solid anchor as we journey on). Perhaps, though, my favorite Dante exercise is grounded in our reading of “Purgatorio” 27. Here’s how it works: 1) We make this trip every year and have since 1995. 2) It’s completely voluntary, and most years around 90% participate. 3) The students meet me on a Sunday morning in early November in front of our Middle School at 3:55 a.m. (I tell them that “life is short,” so WAKE UP!! See “Inferno” 1). 4) The kids pile into a mini-bus, and I drive them to the base of Sugar Loaf Mountain, about an hour and a half away. 5) After listening to a lovely, motivational song, “Don’t Look Down,” by Bill Danoff (Danoff co-wrote “Country Roads” with John Denver), we put on our backpacks, crawl under the gate (we have permission!), and begin our forty-five minute hike up “Mt. Purgatory.” Fortunately, it has been often cool and clear. We use flashlights for safety, but many times, the moonlight and

starlight have been illumination enough. 5) Just prior to sunrise, we reach the top where there is an eastward viewing area perfectly suited for us to read, listen and watch. Each student commandeers a smooth rock, takes out her copy of "Purgatorio," and, with Venus blazing brilliantly for what seemingly appears to be just for US, we pass a flashlight around for each person to read aloud from "Purgatorio" 27. Dream #3 is contrasted with the previous two, but mostly, we discuss Virgil's final words to the Pilgrim. No matter how many times I read those words, I tear up and choke up (I'm a SAP and proud of it!), and I do my best not to let that reaction define our discussion, but it's tough. Virgil's father/teacher/coach qualities burst through, and it's especially cool to have the students think about a will that is "free, upright and whole," one that can now "let pleasure be [its] guide." 6) To complement the conversation, I play two pieces of music while the sun begins its gradual rise. A) I use a children's song by Tom Chapin (Harry's brother) titled, "May You Grow in Your Own Sweet Way," and B) I play "Bring Him Home" from "Les Miserables." Both of these pieces put into words and tone a glimpse of what I imagine is going through Virgil's mind and heart as he watches his "son" sleep for the final time. 7) Our time on the peak of "Mt. Purgatory" concludes with our attentively watching the sun come up while listening to a beautiful song from the "Field of Dreams" sound track titled, "The Place Where Dreams Come True." Once we make it back down to the base, we have a kind of "Purgatorial Breakfast," not quite the "bread of angels," but it hits the spot after a healing assent nonetheless!!

#### [#7- Mt. Purgatory Sunrise Photo](#)

#### [#8- Mt. Purgatory Breakfast](#)



Our reading pilgrimage ends with a close reading of key sections of “Paradiso.” I remind the students that making it to this point is an earned grace and that we must pay close attention to what Barbara Reynolds asserts about a C. S. Lewis passage from The Great Divorce: “The joys of Heaven, in our present condition, are an acquired taste. Dante’s “Paradiso” is about the acquisition of that taste.” We start with Canto One and try to get the flavor of Heaven by first attending to the Pilgrim’s confusion about where he is and how he arrived there. To that end, I first tell the students an “anecdote as antidote.” My friend, Milton, told me a story once about the first day he and his wife brought their daughter home from the hospital. Before anything else, he laid down on the floor, with his daughter on his chest, and together they listened to a Brandenburg Concerto. He told me that he wanted his daughter, Massey, to know from day #1 in their home, that **there was order to the universe**. Wow! I just loved it, it stayed with me, and I decided to use it in class. After recounting the story, I play the students a Brandenburg Concerto and then ask to them, in writing as preparation for discussion, to connect the feel of the music with Beatrice’s clarification for Dante regarding his new “position.” Next comes the tough hurdle of Canto 2 and the spots on the moon conundrum. First, we focus on Dante/Poet’s “taunt” to the reader, and then we discuss how the Pilgrim enters fully into the lunar reality, hopefully with a grateful spirit, without causing a splash. The “best” part of the reading, though, is in trying to make sense of Beatrice’s explanation to the Pilgrim’s query regarding spots on the moon. Clearly, this discussion is important to our understanding of Paradise as a whole, so we dive right in, being at peace that we will not understand it all, but will do our best to wrap our minds around what we can. I bring three mirrors to class, a candle, and we hope... The most poignant observation I’ve heard a kid say about this topic was back in 1996, when Christina Moran observed that the **“spots on the moon are signs of imperfection made beautiful.”** Pretty good, I think. This comment by Christina creates a perfect segue into our encounter with Piccarda, the first blessed person we meet in Paradise. We listen to her and notice, first off, how qualitatively different she sounds than Francesca. Next, we think about and discuss the justice issue regarding Piccarda’s “place” in Paradise. This discussion often raises concerns about whether or not Piccarda’s explanation sounds “cult-like” as well as how it appears to convey that Dante/Poet is “blaming the victim.”

Our trip takes us into Venus next, described in Canto Eight and Nine. Hearing Cunizza and Folco talk about how self-forgiveness is key to a whole, blessed life often prompts a thoughtful discussion about how difficult such self-examination truly is. For high school students, in particular, who regularly find themselves in situations where they might trip up, be in desperate need of forgiveness, inner and outer, yet, as Cunizza concludes, be forced to discover that “vulgar minds may find it hard to see,” this encounter in Venus provides a challenging backdrop to assist them as they come to terms with their mistakes and realize that their “subsisto” does not have to be defined by their worst stumble.

The Cacciaguida cantos are what then feed our attention after we move beyond the Sun. The first thing we note is the community-based trajectory of



Cacciaguida's route towards the Pilgrim and Beatrice. It's very cool that, while he loves his great-great grandson and has been eagerly awaiting his arrival, he still chooses to travel along the beams of the cross, touching base with the center before heading right to the Pilgrim. Echoes of John Denver's song from Day #1 resonate here, and also, perhaps most importantly, Cacciaguida avoids (while I'm fairly confident that it was tempting, though, because family is a powerful lure!) taking the shorter hypotenuse path as it has dangerous Ulysses connotations! We then discuss Dante's future as conveyed by this authoritative family light/soul and talk about, especially, Cacciaguida's challenge to the Pilgrim, to make certain he writes about all that he has seen, and if it hurts listeners initially, that's tough, because his words will eventually morph into "living nourishment." Dante/Pilgrim soon-to-be-Poet now works under the charge of being a kind of Biblical prophet.

Divine Justice has been in our minds ever since we visited Limbo, and it resurges now as we enter Jupiter. First, we simply appreciate the power of the "skywriting" that calls to mind "Surrender Dorothy" as well as the masterpieces created regularly by the Ohio State marching band on New Year's Day at the Rose Bowl!! Then we get down to business listening to the Eagle. The main question I ask the students is: Are you satisfied with the Eagle's explanation? Has the "intellectual muscle" (C.S. Lewis) we have built while reading and travelling been pushed aside now simply by being told "this concern is too big for us?" In an attempt at addressing the collective frustration often shown by the students, we look closely at "Paradiso" 20. An exercise I've tried for years has been to play the students an audio recording of a flowing mountain stream inspired by the image found early in the canto. After listening for three minutes or so, I ask them to write about how the sound of the cascading water does justice (pun intended!) to the ambiguity of the Eagle's message. We then listen to the Eagle again, focus on the very surprising components of the Eye, and then laugh and ponder the wonderful wink-like gesture offered us by Ripheus and Trajan.

Our Dante experience concludes with a close reading of "Paradiso" 30-33. Five key moments are loaded and, certainly, as John Ciardi says, "summon our attention." First, we discuss the river of light and how its shape reveals itself to the Pilgrim. I stress that the Pilgrim and we are in similar places; he needs to bathe his eyes in the river of light so as to realize (**real-eyes, from Brad Levin, English 9**) the river's circular nature, and we are metaphorically refreshing our perspectives as well every time we read closely. Second, we talk about why a Rose-like amphitheater is the perfect image for a healthy, full Paradise. Third, Beatrice's final words are unexpectedly political, and it is worth discussing how the nature of Blessedness can include such an apparently vengeful attitude. Perhaps the idea of good books "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable" can apply here. Fourth, we look at Dante/Pilgrim's parting words to Beatrice and how these are delivered from a paradoxical vantage point ("Paradiso" 31) that is cleverly juxtaposed with the Pilgrim's sense of distance from Matilda described in "Purgatorio" 31. Moreover, it is satisfying and fruitful for the students to notice, in heavenly context, the passage from "Paradiso 31" that C. S. Lewis uses to punctuate

his memoir of healing which we read at the beginning of the course, with the quotation positioned just as Beatrice graciously receives the Pilgrim's message of gratitude. Finally, we address the image of the universe as a "single volume bound by love," with a close eye aimed at the glimpse the Pilgrim (and we) get of the BIG LIGHT. We made it. Yes!

### **Memory Work/Writing Assignments and other pertinent information:**

First, for every class each student memorizes a tercet, and he writes it from memory in his notebook at the beginning of class. In addition, each student, at least twice a year, memorizes two tercets and recites those lines for the purpose of jumpstarting our discussion on a particular day. Before I explain writing expectations, I tell them about a line from the film "Stone Reader" mentioned above. A professor remembers something said to him by one of his graduate school professors (It's firm but, boy, does it set the bar high!!): **"FOR THE FIRST TIME IN YOUR LIFE, PUT DOWN SOME WORDS ON PAPER THAT ACTUALLY MATTER TO YOU."** With that challenge in mind, the writing topics are fairly wide open. I call them PCRs (Post-Class Reflections). They must be at least two pages in length/typed/two passages from the text. The main goal is for each student to convey, in writing, how Dante is "read[ing] her." During the first quarter, the students write four of these, and for the second quarter, they each write two. Additionally, Harry Chapin must be cited as a meaningful support with four of Harry's songs being used by the end of the course. *MLA* format is expected for citations along with a "Works Cited" statement (for scholar practice!). Also I incorporate regular twenty minute, written in-class pieces that often work well. For example, I purchased a box titled, "Take What You Need," containing nine coins with desired virtues, such as courage, hope, patience, strength, etc. The students blindly choose one and connect, in writing, with the daily reading. It's a simple "school thing," but thoughtful pieces often emerge. Perhaps my favorite prompt as we move towards the end of "Paradiso" is basically to say, "Respond to the experience of WOW!" at home in twenty minutes AFTER you have read. Then for the next reading assignment, the students essentially have the same prompt, yet modified, to "Wow. Indeed!! The "joys of Heaven" we have "acquired" certainly deserve a few "Wows," I think. Indeed!!

Two "formal" writing assignments seem to have "clicked" over the years: 1) I propose the following "fact": Choose your favorite quotation from any source. If the passage truly captures a glimpse of the truth, it will be open to meaningful revision. Add the appropriate additional insights, and A) Explain what the newly created passage means to you now that you have met Dante, and his story, and B) How does the fresh quotation clearly capture the essence of a moment in the *Comedy*? These pieces are expected to be at least three pages in length and typed; 2) I provide photocopies for the students of approximately twenty pictures from the Ashley Book of Knots, gleaned from the visual/written epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter from Annie Prioulx's The Shipping News. Each student chooses a knot that seems to summon him to alertness and then writes about why its elegance is so

personally appealing. Next she explains how this particular knot's function reveals the way two people from Dante's story interact (are tied together). Sometimes this assignment has generated a strong response.

### [#9- Sample Student Work #1](#)

### [#10- Sample Student Work #2](#)

The students do take a two-hour final exam, but the last few years, I have made it more of a final Dante experience, rather than something rigorously graded (I try to have some assignments that are off of the "quantifying grid"). Since I asked them to consider on Day #1 that every good experience should begin and end with music, I use music as the springboard for this exercise. I play three pieces of music and then ask the students to write for approximately fifty minutes describing how Dante/Poet, now that he has finished both the pilgrimage itself and the writing journey, might find one of these three songs particularly satisfying as he rests and contemplates all that has happened. Volunteers then read selected papers, and we talk music and Dante, just like we have been doing all semester. Each year I am very grateful to have shared this journey "from Dark Wood to White Rose" (Helen Luke) with brand new, first-time "fellow pilgrims on the road."

The final component of my "body of Dante work" is an exciting project that is currently off and running. For many years I have had the idea of creating a book-length anthology of high school writing on Dante, and three summers ago, I decided to prepare a formal proposal, submit it to a publisher and see what developed. After about seven months, I heard back with a very enthusiastic, "yes, we are very interested in such a project." Later that spring, I heard that the Dante Society of America was also especially supportive of this enterprise as a component of its "Education and Outreach" division. Thus, for the past two years, co-editors, Ronald Herzman, William Stephany, Milton Burke and I have been hard at work editing samples of high school student writing on Dante with the goal of posting them on the DSA website. The displayed work will serve as models for high school teachers who have received Dante work written in the spirit we are seeking and who might be interested in submitting papers for possible inclusion in the anthology. To date we have twenty-nine (29) papers posted and eager to be read [[Student Encounters](#)]. Submissions will come to my email address, and I will then distribute them to the other editors. Our main challenge is figuring out how to get the "word out" about this project so that teachers who use Dante will know and consider submitting. We are working on it, and as Josephine Humphreys reminds us in her wonderful novel, *The Fireman's Fair*, "the [Dante] ball is in hope's court."

See also Dan's article on teaching Dante in *SMART (Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching)*, Spring, 1998, under the title "Celestial Cross-Pollination" at *Work*: *High School Students Respond to Dante*.

### [#2- SMART Article](#)

