

A “Pilgrim-atic” Portal of Experience

The Divine Comedy follows Dante as he goes on his pilgrimage, and in reading it I have empathized with the naïve Florentine; his confusion, his fascination, his frustration, and all other manner of emotion have all been shared between us. This is truly the characteristic of *The Commedia* that will remain with me, its power to guide readers—even 700 years after its naissance—on a journey alongside its unlikely (and perhaps undeserving) hero. The moral code that Dante Alighieri spent decades imbuing into his work, however, carries less weight with me, for his values are either platitudinous, indecipherable, or entirely alienating. Perhaps something has been lost in translation. Never before have I been able to relate a text so closely to its author, and therefore feel a certain bond between myself and the creator of this 100 canto quest. So, of all the messages present in *The Divine Comedy*, the one that has most affected me is the idea that a work can have such power to evoke emotions (both intended and not) from, and to connect with, a reader.

Confusion was certainly the most common feeling this text elicited. Much like Dante Pilgrim, I had queries about nearly every terza, and only with an expert set of guides was I able to gain any level of understanding. Almost every text I have read in the past has been comprehensible without a major set of notes, yet here there were many points where Dante’s words and concepts were simply too foreign for any layman to understand or enjoy. While reading and studying the text, this element of the unknown proved quite frustrating, and yet, looking back I realize that if I had understood everything in *The Commedia* without reading it, then there would have been little purpose in studying it. Further, I find that confusion must be a

basic part of the piece, for its subject matter is not one that any mortal (even its author) can understand, and that the poem was written—at least in some part—to be an introspective expedition for Dante, one that, although it has been read by countless people, was ultimately a sort of therapy, meant to heal Dante after being torn from his comfortable life. Because this text is so personal, there must be elements that no one but the creator can ever understand, and even he, being in a vulnerable and uncertain state as he began writing his magnum opus, likely was not fully sure of himself and his ideas. Just as Dante Poet stumbled through Italy and Dante Pilgrim through “the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns,” so too did I toil through the text, often ending up with more questions than answers.

Although Dante Pilgrim’s irritation at Dante Poet’s conception of the afterlife is less apparent than his bewilderment, I still believe that frustration is a common sense between the Pilgrim and (most) readers, and was certainly essential to my conception of the piece. This second element of *The Commedia* that has stuck with me, its seemingly incorrect and (sometimes) incomplete nature, once again springing from its contentious topic, kept the work relevant as I read. Simply studying the text made me want to speak to, argue with, and ask questions of the author as nothing else has. There are too many concerns I have regarding the format of *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* for me to feel comfortable leaving them unanswered. At times, Dante Pilgrim had similar thoughts, but as he continued down his path, he began to accept the positioning of souls, whereas my disagreements with Dante Poet’s choices only grew. I still want to ask how Dante Poet can say that non-Christians belong in Limbo, but then puts some in Paradise, why unbaptized children must live in Hell, how he can exhibit such arrogance as to say he will one day exist in the highest realm of Heaven, and so much more. Yet,

none of these questions can ever be answered, for Dante Alighieri is long dead, and perhaps that is for the best, for it leaves the text open for me to question and to doubt, for part of the poem's essence is its imperfection.

As Dante makes painstakingly clear, sometimes words cannot describe what one perceives or thinks. I find this to be an issue in everyday life, which makes the fact that Dante managed to come up with phrases to describe an experience he never had and was entirely alien from anything earthly, so amazing. Even with its flaws, *The Divine Comedy's* mere existence is a testament to the author's imagination, and is humbling. As I often struggle to translate thoughts into words, the inability of Dante to do this is wholly understandable, and makes the entire work seem more genuine, more human. His willingness to admit these shortcomings is also striking, for it goes against his arrogant nature. Although words can never entirely communicate inner ponderings, Dante does manage to project not only his thoughts into text, but also into the speech of a separate character, one who bears his namesake.

The final element of *The Divine Comedy* that most awes me is the relationship between its protagonist and its writer. Part memoir, part fiction, *The Commedia* displays Dante Poet's ability to project himself onto a character, a capacity that astounds me, as do the dual paths of growth of the Dantes. The change in Dante Poet's mindset over the course of two decades becomes evident simply in reading the first canto of *Inferno* and then the end of *Paradiso*. Although some themes remain throughout (denouncement of the Church), Dante Poet has clearly discovered clearer footing and found some sort of peace for himself by the end. The literary journey, although it only took three days, signifies so much more effort in reality, and, even though Dante Pilgrim is not Dante Poet, I cannot help but feel that the two are nearly identical (at

least in the start). Dante Poet managed to take a clear analysis of himself in 1300 through his writing, and, despite his apparent hubris, was able to recognize his flaws and expound upon them. The image of a much older Dante writing about himself in his youth remained with me throughout my reading, and I expect will continue to be present in my mind.

Ultimately, *The Divine Comedy's* effect on me was that it altered my perception of the written word. I now understand how much emotion an author can pour into his work, and see that characters do not have to exist in an entirely fictitious vacuum, they can be reflections of the real world. The power writers wield—to construct cathedrals of cantos, to bind themselves to readers centuries later, to drive someone to a new faith—is immense, and often entirely unknown to them. Dante Alighieri's efforts to describe his personal journey had massive ramifications (that he likely never could have predicted) for future generations. Perhaps his words and ideas have become antiquated, but his power to make others relate to his stumbling past self, and to contemplate their own paths, their pasts, and their futures, will always remain the same.