

DANTE ALIGHIERI - THE DIVINE COMEDY - PAOLO AND FRANCESCO IN HELL

Dante's great epic tells of his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, guided at first by the Roman poet Virgil and then by his beloved Beatrice. Hell consists of a deep, terraced pit, each level representing a different sin, where the souls of the lost receive their fitting punishments. After passing through Limbo (where dwell the souls of the virtuous non-Christians-Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Caesar, Cicero, Averroes, Avicenna, and Saladin among them), they enter the circle of the Lustful. Dante sees many famous lovers but spends most of his time visiting with two contemporaries of his, Francesca da Rimini and her lover Paolo Malatesta, who was also her brother-in-law.

After I heard my Master recite the names of all these lovers-knights and dames, I was dazed with pity, confused, and ashamed. I said, "With all my heart, dear Poet, I wish to speak with those two there, who move with such mystique, Gliding lightly on the winds, both strong and weak." And he said, "You will see, when they draw near, That if you ask them, in the name of their love so dear, to tell their tale, they will comply. Soon, you will hear."

Then, a gusty blast drove the pair beside us, and I called over the wind, "If it has not denied us, O battered souls, come and tell us your tale. Oblige us." Like doves who, driven by desire and will, stretch out their wings and soar high until they reach their nest, ready to take their fill of their love, so did these two fly from the throng there that surrounded Dido toward us through the malignant air, so strongly did my tender call affect the pair. "O gracious creature, O one so good, who through even this foul atmosphere, would come visit us, who stained the world with would blood!

Were it in our power to be friends with the Universal King, we would ask Him to grant you peace, for you bring a spirit of generous pity for the pain we're suffering. Whatever you wish to say, to ask, or to know, it is our pleasure to help you understand to grow, especially here where the mighty wind has ceased to blow.

The land where I was born lies on the shore where the Po River and the waters that feed it, both great and poor, flow to where they flow no more. Love, which quickly can seize the gentlest heart, gripped this man here, lusted for my body's art in a way that still tears my soul apart. Then Love, which spares no beloved from love's ration, gripped me as well with such a lusty passion that, as you can see, it binds us still in a fashion. And Love then caused us both to die; Cain's Hell awaits our killer! -That is our cry!' such were the words the air carried, like a sigh.

When those guilty souls had finished their tale, I bowed my head in sadness at their betrayal. My Poet asked, "What do you think of suffering on that scale?" At length, I spoke: "Master, I cannot explain: All those sweet thoughts of love and desire's strain brought these two lovers so much pain!" Then I turned to the pair and tried to speak. "Francesca," I began, "the torment you suffer is so bleak that my eyes fill with tears that roll down my cheek.

But please, I beg you: In your blissful hours-, How, by what signs, did Love's great powers Allow the two of you to know each other's desires?" "There is no pain that is greater," she began, "(if I may), then to remember, here, on this grim, bleak day, The happiness we had then. Your Guide knows and can say as much! But if you truly wish to know how such a love as ours did grow, I'll tell you- my words and tears both shall flow. One day we sat reading, to pass the time, of Sir Lancelot's [and Guinevere's] passionate crime.

We were alone, innocent, and in our prime. Over and over again, as we read, our eyes met, and our faces flushed and with tender sighs, we yielded at the moment when, with passionate cries, those two lovers brought together their trembling lips.

Imagining that he was, like Lancelot, in the grips of like love, this one here, who forever trips By my side, gently kissed me. I doubt not whether it was that book which brought us together, And yet all that day, we read no further." As she spoke these lines, poor Guido wept So fully and movingly that pity swept over me. Dazed and swooning, I then stepped to one side and fell near-dead to Hell's stony floor.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. How do Francesca and Paolo embody the code of chivalry? How do they transgress the code? What is the meaning of the reference to Lancelot?
2. What attitude does Dante take toward Paolo and Francesca?