*from the* Divine Comedy: Inferno

Dante Alighieri

**(1265–1321)**

Dante Alighieri , whose visions of Hell have haunted readers for centuries, is widely considered one of the greatest poets of Western civilization. T. S. Eliot wrote, “Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them. There is no third.”

**Political Chaos**Dante was born into a poor but noble family in Florence, Italy. At the time, Italy was not a unified country but a collection of independent city-states. These city-states were marked by fierce political turbulence and power struggles between ruling families. The states were constantly at war with each other while they simultaneously battled civil unrest within their own borders.

**Painful Exile**As a member of the nobility, Dante became an elected official. Along with six other officials, he ran Florence’s government. However, in 1300, a street accident led to a skirmish, which escalated into a full-blown civil war. Dante’s political party and all its representatives were overthrown. In 1302, Dante was officially exiled from his beloved city, never to return. His experience of exile would later play an important role in his writing.

**Writing in Italian**Scholars believe that Dante studied law and rhetoric at the University of Bologna, one of Europe’s most prestigious institutions of higher learning. Bologna also boasted a great poetic tradition, and it was there that Dante discovered a school of writers who sought to free poetry from the limitations imposed by the church and government. At the time, most writers wrote in Latin, the language of scholars. Dante believed that poets should write in the language of the people—in his case, Italian. In 1304, he published*De Vulgari Eloquentia,* in which he argued for the use of the common tongue in works of literature. He wrote many lyric poems in Italian; however, it was with his *Divine Comedy* that he created the crowning achievement of medieval literature.

**Principle of the Trinity**Completed shortly before his death, the *Commedia,*which later gained the honorific title *Divina,* documents the physical and spiritual journey of a man who is also named Dante. Dante used the number three, which represents the Christian concept of the trinity, as an organizing principle for the *Divine Comedy.* Consisting of 100 cantos, the poem is divided into three parts—the *Inferno,* the *Purgatorio,* and the *Paradiso.* Each part contains thirty-three cantos; there is also an introductory first canto for the *Inferno,* the only one that takes place on Earth. Within each canto, the verse form is *terza rima,* a stanza of three lines. In addition, Dante’s journey takes three days, beginning on Good Friday and ending on Easter Sunday.

**The Love of His Life**Guiding Dante on his pilgrimage is his beloved Beatrice, whose name means “she who blesses.” It is believed that Dante modeled his literary Beatrice on the real-life Bea-trice Portinari. Although evidence suggests that Dante saw the real Beatrice only twice in his life—first when he was nine years old and then again nine years later—she became for Dante the force that led him out of his despair. She was first the subject of his love poetry; later, she became both the object of his religious quest and a symbol of spiritual purity. Beatrice, the guiding presence in Dante’s life and in his poem, is literally and symbolically his link between heaven and Earth.

In 1321, shortly after completing the *Paradiso,* Dante died in the city of Ravenna in northern Italy.

**Preview**

**Connecting to the Literature**

Imagine a movie that begins with a lone man lost in a dark forest. Suddenly, a leopard and a lion leap from the shadows, baring their fangs. The man runs, only to come face to face with a vicious wolf. This selection opens with just such a scene and contains all the drama of a Hollywood film.

**Literary Analysis**

**Allegory**

An **allegory** is a literary work with two levels of meaning—the literal and the symbolic. In an allegory, every detail, character, and plot point has an equivalent symbolic meaning. For example, an allegory in which a rowboat floating down a river symbolizes the journey of life might have these symbolic equivalents:

* rowboat = person
* water = flow of time
* two oars = hard work and persistence
* rudder = love or guidance

The *Divine Comedy* is a complex allegory in which a literal journey symbolizes a man’s struggle for redemption. As you read, try to identify the allegorical meanings of the places and characters Dante encounters.

**Connecting Literary Elements**

**Imagery** is the use of language that appeals to one or more of the five senses and creates mental pictures for the reader. Dante uses imagery to make the allegorical world of his poem seem tangible and real, helping the reader *feel* the ideas. As you read, notice language that appeals to the senses and creates powerful word pictures in your mind.

**Reading Strategy**

**Interpreting Imagery**

To interpret an image, identify which of the five senses it involves. Then, classify the physical experience the image creates by the sight, sound, taste, smell, or sense of touch it evokes. Finally, define the emotion or idea the image conveys. As you read, use a chart like the one shown to interpret imagery.

