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Dante Alighieri

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Dante Alighieri may not be a familiar name to many. To some people, he is known as *il Sommo Poeta* ("the Supreme Poet") and is considered one of "the three fountains" of the Italian literature.¹ He is most well-known for his poem- The Divine Comedy- which has 100 cantos and consists of more than 14000 lines. The question is what drove this ordinary man from an ordinary family background who was neither a priest nor a pope to write such an impressive length of poem detailing in religious idea of justice and punishment. Therefore, the most interesting thing about Dante which will be discussed in this essay is Dante's political and religious views which were the main themes of the poem.

First of all, one needs to know what kind of place Dante grew up in to be able to fully understand what kind of environment had shaped his thought. He was born in Florence, Italy to a family of lower nobility which prevented him from reaching higher education. This had contributed to his resentment towards the dominance of the elites in upper class in his later life. At 9 years old, he met Beatrice whom he fell in love with at the first sight. Unfortunately, he was betrothed to someone else.

¹ Wikipedia Contributors. Dante Alighieri. Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. 9 Jan 2013. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dante_Alighieri

However, he still loved her so much that he put her as a goddess in his Divine Comedy poem to honor her above all women.²

During the time of Dante, there were political separations of the Florentines. People were divided into the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The Ghibellines were in favor of European unification under the Holy Roman Emperor while the Guelphs were more of a nationalist. Within the Guelphs, people also separated themselves into Black Guelphs and White Guelphs. The Black Guelphs consisted mainly of rich land owners and wealthy people with high socio economic status. Some were associated with the old aristocracy of knighthood.³ The Black Guelphs loved the Pope and see him as an ally against the imperial power but the White Guelphs which Dante belonged to hated the Pope and wanted to be independent of both the Pope and The Holy Roman Emperor.⁴ Dante himself was against the idea of European unification. He felt that mixing the Florentine people who were city people with those in the countryside would not do any good. On top of that, the idea of economic expansion would bring about more corruption. Dante always believed in the idea of autonomous, self-governing sovereign state.⁵ Therefore, he was against the Ghibellines. He was also against the Black Guelphs because he felt that the role of the Pope was to be a spiritual leader, not to intervene with the politics and try to make himself the leader of both religious and political worlds. With all these reasons, Dante thus hated the Ghibellines, The pope and the Black Guelphs.

² Youtube Contributor. Introduction to Divine Comedy project. Youtube. 11 Jan 2013.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=poUT9Xvtd1U>

³ John M. Najemy. The Cambridge Companion to Dante. 1995. Pg80-81.

⁴ PoemHunter Contributor. Dante Alighieri. PoemHunter. 11 Jan 2013.
<http://www.poemhunter.com/dante-alighieri/biography/>

⁵ John M. Najemy. The Cambridge Companion to Dante. 1995. Pg82.

The conflict between the parties was so strong that there was a struggle for power between the Guelphs and Ghibellines throughout the mid-thirteenth century and the civil war between the Blacks and The Whites of the years around 1300.⁶ By the end of the civil war, The Blacks, with the help of Pope Boniface, seized power and Dante was exiled to Northern Italy.⁷ As unlikely as it may sound, Dante saw his exile as an opportunity. This was because towards the end of the civil war, Dante began to think that Florence was not an ideal place to stay. He saw Florence as a city full of violence and political instability with selfish people whose hunger for wealth and power can never be satisfied enough. On top of that, being outside Florence would allow him to criticize the way the city is run and the people who ran it more openly. His opinion will no longer be suppressed by the one in power. Neither would it be influenced by the wrong people. Being away from the sinful city allow him to redeem himself politically and religiously for the first time.

From the explanation in the earlier paragraphs, one could imagine the kind of society Dante had to grow up in. One could also see that with the chaos, instability, violence and corruption he had to live with, the idea of justice in the real world had failed him disappointedly. Dante had witnessed so many injustice and evil deeds in his life that he wanted to reinforce into people's mind God's ideal benchmark of rights and wrongs. He wanted his poem to be a wake-up call to people who were misled by worldly temptation to do evil and corrupted politician.

⁶ John M. Najemy. *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*. 1995. Pg82.

⁷ Middle-Ages contributor. Dante. Middle-Ages. 25 Jan 2013. <http://www.middle-ages.org.uk/dante.htm>

In the poem, he took an arduous journey through the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso. The journey took him 3 days, starting on Good Friday and ending on Easter Sunday. There were all together 9 circles of Hell and 4 Rivers.⁸

Many people think that his idea of the Inferno was influenced by Aristotle's 3 moral states – Incontinence, Brutishness and Malice.⁹ The idea of Malice here is referring the misuse of one's intellect to overcome God. Dante felt that God created the churches to take care of people's spiritual needs and create the government to take care of the politics. He felt that it is very wrong of the pope to try to outwit God by combining these two to be under his control. Incontinence also includes the idea of Gluttony which is failure to control your natural desires and consume excessively. In Dante's time, only the rich people could eat all they like. Dante associates this with over-indulgence and lack of discipline. This is a quality in which he saw in many Black Guelphs. Another good example from the poem would be when Lucifer (the Satan) chews on Judas the betrayer of Christ and on Cassium and Brutus who were the betrayer of Caesar.¹⁰ Dante saw that the people who tried to undermine the power of people who God selected to govern the earth should be condemned with the harshest punishment. Thus this poem serve as a warning to people who went against God's will and try to become overly powerful (The Pope, the greedy Balck Guelphs, and the

⁸ Funtrivia contributor. Dante. Fun Trivia. 27 Jan 2013. <http://www.funtrivia.com/en/Literature/Dante-8891.html>

⁹ Youtube Contributor. Devine Comedy Project- Intro to Inferno. YouTube. 30 Jan 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKOT6NicBS8>

¹⁰ Sparknotes contributor. Dante. Sparknotes. 31 Jan 2013. <http://sparknote.com/poetry/inferno/facts.html>

Ghibellines who want to unify the whole Europe under them destroying the stability God created).

Last but not least, I would say that Dante's poem serve 2 purposes – religious and political. From a religious perspective, his poem reignite in people's heart the sense of right and wrong. He showed to people exactly what kind of punishment each sinner will get. This helps elevated people's moral's values. From the political perspective, his poem also serves as critics to Florentine politicians and a warning to the people of his enemies' evil plan. Not only had Dante contributed greatly to his country in term of politics and religion, he had also made Italian a national language, eradicating the dominance of Classical Latin during that time.¹¹ It is sad to say that a person who had contributed so much in many various ways to Florence were left to die outside Florence and till now his dead body had not returned to Florence.

¹¹ Robert J. Clements. American Critical Essays on the Divine Comedy. 1967. Pg223-229