

**Department:** Modern and Classical Languages

**Course No:** 255 W

**Credits:** 3

**Title:** Dante's Divine Comedy in English Translation

**Contact:** Roger Travis, Franco Masciandaro

**Content Area:** CA1-Arts and Humanities

**WQ:** Writing

**Catalog Copy:** 255W. Dante's Divine Comedy in English Translation. Either semester. Three credits. Prerequisite: ENGL 105 or 110 or 250. This course may not be counted toward the Italian Literary and Cultural Studies major or minor group. Masciandaro Dante's poem as a unique synthesis of Medieval culture. Emphasis on integration of ethics, political thought, and theology with poetic imagination.

**Course Information:** a. This course is a historical and literary survey whose principal aim is to help students to critically evaluate Dante's Divine Comedy as a unique synthesis of Medieval culture that integrates ethics, political thought, and theology with poetic imagination, knowledge with vision. b. Students are required to write 6 short essays (two pages) on a salient aspect of the assigned readings, which have been discussed in class. There is also a final essay, 6-8 pages long, on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor. This may be an expansion of one of the earlier papers.

There will be a midterm and final examination, constituted by a combination of essay questions and short factual questions.

The weekly reading assignments consist of a number of cantos and corresponding episodes selected from the Divine Comedy. The focus will be on the main themes represented in these episodes, selected from Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise, in relation to scenes and characters encountered by Dante-the-pilgrim. The writing assignments will be based on these readings and on the class discussions of the latter.

The major themes to be covered include Dante's idea of love, his theology of history, the role of the pagan poet Virgil, as a guide in a Christian journey to God, the presence in the poem of classical myths, and of Biblical themes as that of the Fall and the nostalgia for Eden, of exile and Exodus, and the role of the poet in society and, specifically, in the moral and spiritual journey of humankind. Another important theme to be discussed is Dante's cosmology, his philosophical and theological concerns, and his indebtedness to thinkers such as Aristotle, S. Augustine, and S. Thomas Aquinas.

**Meets Goals of Gen Ed:** 1. In this course students are given the opportunity to become more

articulate, orally through class discussions of the weekly reading assignments, and in writing by formulating their ideas and interpretations prompted by the readings and the class discussions. Students are allowed to hand in a first draft of each assigned essay, and, after these have been handed back by the instructor with his comments and suggestions concerning the student's clarity and cogency in articulating his/her discourse, the student hands in a final draft.

3. This course encourages students to develop critical judgement as the selected passages from the Divine Comedy are analysed and discussed from a number of viewpoints. For example, the student is made aware of the difference between the early commentaries of Dante's poem, with their specific interpretations of a certain theme or problematic represented in the poem, and later critical readings, such as those formulated by modern scholars belonging to a variety of "schools" - from "New Criticism" to structuralism, and from formalism to new historicism.

4. Without losing sight of the Dante's craft and of the importance of his sources, this course gives students the opportunity to acquire moral sensitivity as they address the major themes represented in the Divine

Comedy: all characters in the poem, including Dante-the-character (and of course, the Poet), are view and judged according to the moral decisions they made on earth. Dante, again and again, stresses the importance of the individual working within his/her community, city, and the world in general, for the common good. Within this context, special attention is given to the role of the poet, and of intellectuals in general, with their moral responsibility to expose the violence which accompanies greed and lust for power, as Dante himself attempts to do as he condemns the corruption of his age in his Florence, in Italy and in the rest of medieval Europe, both in the secular and religious spheres and institutions. In this course students are urged to engage in timely discussions of these, and other similar issues, both as aspects of Dante's medieval world and, by analogy, as current problems than one experiences individually and collectively.

5. Obviously, as suggested above, students are also given the opportunity to become more keenly aware of their own era and society, as they discover important aspects of the Middle Ages represented in Dante's poem, including their uniqueness, and as they encounter the special way in which that age absorbed and transformed what it inherited from the Classical world of Greece and Rome, and, especially, from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, the role of classical mythology, the Biblical themes of exile and Exodus, the special role as guide in Dante's journey to God of the pagan poet Virgil, the influence of Aristotelian thought on Dante's Christian ethics, etc., are integral part of the class discussions of several episodes and corresponding scenes and characters that bring to light these themes, traditions and their influences. All of this is of course strengthened by the written work of critical analysis and interpretation in which students are engaged throughout!  
the semester.

**CA1 Criteria:** 1. This course is a historical and literary survey whose principal aim is to help students to critically evaluate Dante's Divine Comedy as a unique synthesis of Medieval culture. It integrates ethics, political thought, and theology with poetic imagination, knowledge with vision. Students are specifically engaged in discovering the evolution of poetic forms and genres, such as the "epic", which essentially characterizes Dante's poem, which in form and content harks back, especially through Virgil's *Aeneid* to Homer's *Iliad*. Students are also given the

opportunity to discover, from a historical perspective, the art of rhetoric and hence matters involving eloquence and style, as well as the creative tension between rhetoric, and its role in poetic composition, and philosophy.

2. In this course emphasis is also given to the philosophical underpinnings of Dante's poem. For example, his Christian aristotelianism which in part he borrows from Thomas Aquinas, but also the Augustinian influence, especially represented by the \*Confessions\*, on Dante's spiritual journey to God. Special attention is also given to Dante's theology of history and political theory, which condemns the secular powers of the Papacy in his time.

3. Obviously, given the nature of the poem analyzed and discussed in this course, students learn to identify and appreciate symbolic modes of representation, the function of allegory, and the special creative force of "poetic logic", which complements discursive reasoning.

**W Criteria:** 1. The writing component of this course is designed to enhance students' understanding of and critical analysis of Dante's poem by emphasizing the special function of the written expression, of the immense resources of language that the students again and again encounter in the Divine Comedy, resources which they are encouraged to a certain degree to imitate as they address problems of composition and of articulating their thoughts and responses to the text. In these assignments the focus is on the main characters, themes, ideas encountered in the weekly readings and discussed in class.

2. To help students improve their writing skills while formulating their critical responses to Dante's poem, they are required to write 6 short essays (two pages, typed, double space) on a salient aspect of the assigned readings, which have been discussed in class. Students are also required to write a longer, final paper (6-8 pages), on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor. This may be an expansion of an earlier short essay.

3. The instructor will comment on the first draft of each essay, giving pertinent suggestions intended to help each student to formulate a critical discourse cogently and persuasively, pointing out, with concrete examples, ways of becoming more effective communicators by reviewing/editing/'pruning' their essays. If needed, individual conferences with students will be arranged to help them in to write more effectively.

4. The instructor will specify, on the syllabus and verbally in class, that all writing assignments must not be summaries of the readings but the students' critical response or analysis of significant passages, themes, concepts, etc. read and discussed in class.

The syllabus will also state that the short essays will constitute 30% of the final grade, and the final essay 25% of the grade, and that the students must have a passing grade in the writing component in order to pass the course. Class participation will constitute 10%, the midterm 15%, and the final exam 20% of the final grade in the course.