

The Roles of Virgil in Dante's Divine Comedy: An Investigation of Primary and Secondary Sources

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The Divine Comedy: A Synopsis

The Divine Comedy is an epic poem by the Dante Alighieri in which the character Dante must travel through Hell and Purgatory with the aid of Virgil before he is brought into Heaven by the first love of his life, Beatrice. The poem is not only the story of an imagined physical journey through the afterlife but also an allegorical journey towards salvation and a representation of the development of the poet.

The Importance of Virgil

- ❖ Publius Virgilius Maro or, more commonly, Virgil or Vergil
- ❖ Influential classical poet
- ❖ Author of epic poem *The Aeneid* and the "Fourth Eclogue"

The Physical Guide

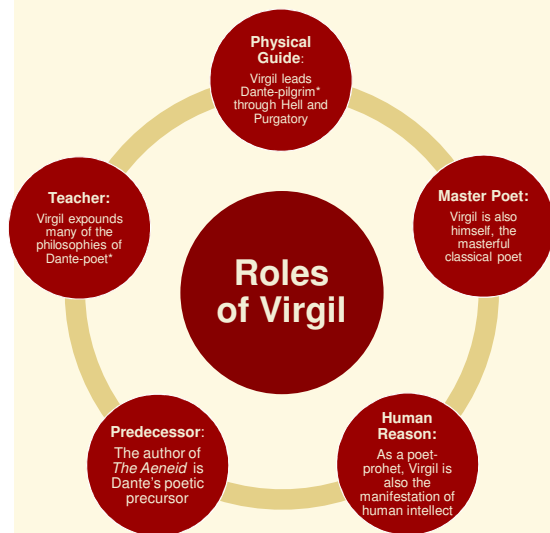
- ❖ Virgil's most obvious role is that of a character in the poem and Dante-pilgrim's guide through Hell and Purgatory.
- ❖ Virgil establishes his role as guide immediately, ordering Dante simply to "Follow" (*Inferno* 1.127)
- ❖ No stranger to Hell, Virgil reveals that he was previously sent by the witch Erichtho to the depths of Hell (*Inferno* 2.19-24), establishing his credibility as a character.
- ❖ Dante-poet and Dante-pilgrim both most commonly reference Virgil as "my Guide".
- ❖ In this role Virgil is primarily a character for Dante-pilgrim to physically follow within the narrative thread of the *Commedia*.



Dante and Virgil confronted by demons in the Fifth Bolgia (Gustave Doré)

Human Reason

- ❖ Virgil is also the personification of human reason and classical wisdom.
- ❖ One of the reasons that Beatrice assigns Virgil to guide Dante is for his "high council" (*Inferno* 2. 67).
- ❖ Virgil's Fourth Eclogue was considered by many medievals to be a pre-Christian prophecy of the coming of Christ, a connection that was used to join the pagan tradition to Christianity recasting Virgil as a sort of poetic prophet.
- ❖ Dante plays upon this connection in *Purgatorio* XXII where the character Sataius calls to Virgil: "You were the lamp that led me from that night./You led me forth to drink Parnassian water;/ then on the road to God you shed your light" (*Purgatorio* 22.64-65).



Master Poet

- ❖ When Beatrice chooses Virgil to guide Dante, she addresses him as the Mantuan, "whose melodies/ life in earth's memory and shall live on/till the last motion ceases in the skies" (*Inferno* 2.58-60)
- ❖ This is made most apparent in *Inferno* Canto IV where Virgil and Dante enter limbo and Virgil is greeted as the "Prince of Poets" (*Inferno* 2.80)
- ❖ Virgil's role as master poet makes the connection between the Golden age of Roman poetry and *The Divine Comedy* most concrete and helps establish Dante as his successor.

Teacher

- ❖ In his journey through hell Dante must face, "the double war/of the journey and the pity." (*Inferno* 2.4-5) and learn to overcome his pity for the damned in order to cleanse his soul.
- ❖ Virgil is his teacher in this process, chastising Dante's pity and saying, "Still/Still like the other fools? There is no place/for pity here. Who is more arrogant/within his soul, who is more impious/ than one who dates to sorrow at God's judgment?" (*Inferno* 20.26-30).
- ❖ Virgil also serves as a narrative mouthpiece for Dante-poet to expound on the structure and purpose of Hell, explaining the causation and organization of punishments.

*A common distinction is made in most Dante scholarship between Dante-poet, the author, and Dante-pilgrim, the character.

The Poetic Predecessor

- ❖ As the author of *The Aeneid*, Virgil is also significant as one of the primary creators of the poetic tradition that Dante inherits.
- ❖ As Dante's precursor, the relationship that Virgil has with both Dante-pilgrim and with the text itself is particularly interesting and led me to a reading of Virgil in terms of Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of poetic influence.
- ❖ One of the central tenants of the theory of the anxiety of influence is that the new author or ephebe, in this case Dante, must either grow beyond the influence of the precursor, Virgil, or forever write with in the shade of Virgil's long shadow. *The Divine Comedy* is open to an especially interesting reading of this struggle as Dante not only acknowledges Virgil but makes him a character in the poem itself.
- ❖ Bloom identifies six revisionary ratios whereby the ephebe misreads the precursor and attempts to escape his/her influence and become a "strong poet." While Dante is universally recognized as one of the "strong" there are several of Bloom's ratios present throughout *The Comedy*.
- ❖ "Apophrades," or the resurrection of the dead, is the intentional inclusion of elements from the precursor as a representation of mastery of the work. Dante takes this one step further and includes not only many elements of Virgil but also Virgil himself, a decision that allows Dante to surpass Virgil physically in the context of the poem as well as in terms of poetic mastery.
- ❖ "Clinamen," or a poetic misprision whereby the author revises the work of the precursor, is evident in Canto IV where Dante essentially rewrites Virgil's description of the underworld in *The Aeneid* into a Christian context recreating Virgil's elysian fields as Catholic Limbo.
- ❖ "Tessera," or completion and antithesis, is an act of extension of completion whereby the ephebe pushes the work of the precursor further. In Dante's case he pushes Virgil's conception of an underworld and a journey through the underworld in *The Aeneid* into a much larger epic of its own that goes many times farther than Aeneas ever does.
- ❖ In terms of poetic influence, *The Divine Comedy* may be read as a journey beyond the influence of the precursor. This is perhaps the most subtle but by no means the least important role Virgil plays. Virgil begins as Dante's master and guide in Hell, becomes his fellow pilgrim in Purgatory, and is finally left behind as Dante's poetry, his "great ship that sails and sings" sets a course for an "uncharted sea" (*Paradiso* 2.1-7) and enters heaven. Following this reading, *The Divine Comedy* is an allegory not just of the soul's journey toward redemption but of the poet's journey to escape the influence of his precursor and surpass him/her in mastery.



Portrait of Dante by Sandro Botticelli