

## DANTE ALIGHIERI

The picture below is a painting of **Dante Alighieri**, attributed to Giotto, in the chapel of the Bargello palace in Florence. This is the oldest picture of Dante and was painted just prior to his exile and has since been heavily restored



**DANTE ALIGHIERI**, known today simply as "**Dante**" was born in 1265 in Florence. His official date of birth has never been recorded, though in "*Paradiso*" (xxii, 112-117) he mentions that he was born when sun was in Gemini which fixes his birthday between 18<sup>th</sup> May and 17<sup>th</sup> June 1265.

**Dante** is often considered the finest poet of the Middle Ages and is best known for his epic "*La Divina Commedia*" ("The Divine Comedy"). He was also a philosopher and political thinker who wrote most of his poetry in the Italian vernacular instead of Latin, a choice that would influence the entire course of western literary development.

He is well known for idolizing a woman identified as Beatrice Portinari. Dante met her when they were children, and even though he married someone else it was said that his love for her was "courtly love" – (secret love between members of the nobility). Beatrice died young and before Dante wrote his first major works. **Dante's** dedication and adoration of Beatrice in his poetry made her one of the most celebrated figures in western literature.

He was deeply involved in the politics of his beloved Florence, and as a young man **Dante** fought as a cavalryman, and then entered public office in his thirties. The city was in turmoil in the late 13th century, and his alliance with the White Guelfs led to opposition with the Pope, whom he went to visit on a diplomatic mission. While he was detained in Rome by the papal authorities, the rival Black Guelfs returned to Florence and terrorized the city. In January of 1302 he was called to appear before their new government. He failed to do so, and was condemned for crimes he had not committed. In March that year he once more failed to appear before them, and was condemned to be burned to death should he ever return to Florence.

During his exile, Dante wrote the "*Divine Comedy*" in three parts, which describes his journey through "Hell" (*Inferno*), "Purgatory" (*Purgatorio*), and "Paradise" (*Paradiso*), in which he is guided first by the Roman poet Virgil and then by Beatrice, and by his other work, "*La Vita Nuova*". While the vision of Hell, the *Inferno*, is vivid for modern readers, the theological niceties presented in the other books require a certain amount of patience and knowledge to appreciate. *Purgatorio*, the most lyrical and human of the three, also has the most poets in it; *Paradiso*, the most heavily theological, has the most beautiful and ecstatic mystic passages in which **Dante** tries to describe what he confesses he is unable to convey, such as – when **Dante** looks into the face of God he writes: "all'alta fantasia qui mancò possa" (at this high moment, ability failed my capacity to describe).

In 1316 **Dante** was invited to return to Florence, but the terms were the same as those used for pardoned criminals, and he refused to return under these conditions. **Dante** spent the rest of his life in exile, and died on 14-9-1321 aged 56, in Ravenna.

In Ravenna the custodians of his body buried him in a false wall of the monastery. However in 1829 Florence regretted Dante's exile and a tomb was built for him in the Basilica of Santa Croce. Many requests were made to the custodians to return the body but they failed to oblige. The tomb in Florence has remained empty ever since and his body remained in Ravenna, far away from the city he loved so dearly.

When you visit Florence you will surely go to the Basilica of Santa Croce with **Dante's** statue out front. Visit the empty tomb and you will read: "Onorate l'altissimo poeta" which means "Honour the most exalted poet". **Dante Alighieri** is considered the Father of modern Italian language - the William Shakespeare of Italian language. Today his works are taught in every high school in Italy.

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