

Italian Literature in Translation:  
Dante Alighieri and the *Divine Comedy*

LLEA 337

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Course Proposal for 2021-2022 Study Abroad Program in  
Florence

NOTE: This is a revision of the course on Dante I teach here with the opportunities offered by teaching the course in Florence in mind, and with the Study Abroad SLOs being incorporated. It is not in the rather different format LdM requires, and obviously I would recast it in that format if I were selected as Resident Director. Although I have adjusted the dates on the syllabus to the dates for the Florence program, this is still set up as a course that meets twice a week. My understanding is that courses in Florence typically meet once a week, so there would be some changes needed to convert this to a once a week format. But the content of the course is substantially what I would propose.

**Course Description and Purpose:**

This course is an introduction to the work of Italy's greatest writer and one of the greatest writers in world history, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), focusing on his masterpiece, the *Commedia* (or the *Divine Comedy*). Dante was Florentine, of course, active in its civic and cultural life as a young man, then exiled for political reasons and condemned to death in exile, after which he was a bitter political opponent of Florence for the rest of his life. Reading Dante is therefore a great window into the political, cultural, and religious life of Florence in the late medieval period. The course will be conducted in English, and all reading material will be in English, though virtually all of it will be available in facing-page editions with Italian on one side and English on the other. No prior knowledge of Italian is needed or expected for the course, though of course everyone in the class will be immersed in the Italian-language environment of Florence and therefore will have a growing understanding of Italian as the semester continues.

## Learning Objectives:

The student who completes the course successfully will **know**

- 1) the two major works by the greatest Italian writer, one of the greatest writers in the world;
- 2) much more about the medieval period and worldview, having received an introduction through the *Commedia* to medieval theology, philosophy, politics, geography, science, and virtually every other aspect of medieval culture, especially as found in the city of Florence in 1300;
- 3) much more about the early history of European lyric poetry, especially the crucial forms of the sonnet and *canzone*, and about the tradition of Western epic from Homer and Virgil to Dante himself;

will **do** or **have done** or **have accomplished**

- 4) the task of reading one of the most complex works of world literature, enhancing his or her ability to tackle massive projects with a high degree of independence;
- 5) a great deal of in-class discussion of the themes of these works, enhancing his or her ability to discuss literary works and debate philosophical questions;
- 6) two essays on individual poems or cantos, enhancing his or her ability to write academic prose, interpret literature, and use original and secondary sources;

will (or should) **value**

- 7) the ability of the imaginative capacity to rethink and critique the way things are, thus opening up the possibility of transformation;
- 8) the relevance of earlier periods of history and culture to present-day concerns;
- 9) the central place of Italy and Italian culture in the Western literary tradition and Western culture.

In addition to these course objectives which are valid for this course when taught on the Mānoa campus, courses in the Study Abroad Program have certain common course objectives that reflect the goals of Study Abroad. Students in a Study Abroad Program should gain 1) a deeper knowledge and understanding of other cultures and their environments; 2) different perspectives in regard to other nations; 3) increased capacity to analyze issues

with appreciation for disparate viewpoints; and 4) increased respect and tolerance for differences. These goals are closely aligned with the goals of every course I teach. The first two are essentially content goals, the second two method goals. As my classes are always Socratic discussions in a seminar format, the very format of the class necessarily enhances the method goals of being able to work through complex issues with an enhanced appreciation of and ability to handle difference. And with the crucial addition of other times to other cultures and other nations, students in every class I teach will gain a deeper knowledge and understanding and different perspectives on other cultures, other nations, and other periods in history. But obviously, these objectives take on particular force in a Study Abroad context: the students are gaining that deeper knowledge and appreciation simply by their experiences in a foreign country, and the cross-registration in which students from various programs would be taking courses together will present students with even more disparate viewpoints and differences than they would have at home.

So from those four objectives of Study Abroad come four additional learning objectives for this course.

1. In the extended encounter with the medieval world view of Dante, the student who completes the course will learn an enormous amount about his or her own cultural values and biases and how this may affect his or her ability to work with others.
2. He or she will learn a tremendous amount about that very different cultural perspective.
3. Successful participation in class will necessarily include and involve appropriate and effective communication with diverse individuals and groups.
4. The completion of the essay assignments will necessarily increase the student's capacity to analyze issues with an appreciation for disparate viewpoints.

This course has a Contemporary Ethical Issues (E) Focus designation. Contemporary ethical issues are fully integrated into the main course material and will constitute at least 30% of the content. At least 8 hours of class time will be spent discussing ethical issues. Through the use of lectures, discussions and assignments, students will develop basic competency in recognizing and analyzing ethical issues; responsibly deliberating on ethical issues; and making ethically determined judgments.

Ethics is completely inescapable in the *Commedia*, as the poem judges people from the beginning of history to Dante's own time, placing them among the damned or the saved, as well as in many much finer judgments within those

broad categories. While some of his judgments are dependent on the Christian tradition in which he writes, nonetheless many others are surprising, challenging, even potentially heretical in terms of that tradition. There are, for example, many more popes in hell than in heaven. Encountering a surprising placement should always lead to an ethical reflection: what has Ulysses done to be in hell in the circle of the fraudulent? Why is the pagan suicide Cato in the honored place he is in purgatory?

Moreover, while there is much here which is Dante's judgment and his invention alone, he also is working within traditions of ethical thinking that look back to Aristotle, for Dante 'the master of those who know.' So reading the *Commedia* is also a short course in the ethical traditions of the West. This is also not just an exercise in historical understanding: a major movement in ethical philosophy in the past 50 years or so has been the recovery of Aristotelianism as a viable alternative to the more modern ethical systems of Kant, Mill, and others. So the course should both be occasion for ethical reflections and serve as an introduction to aspects of the history of ethics in both Classical and Christian contexts.

### **Course Format:**

This course will be run as a seminar in which all students are expected to come to class having done the assigned reading and come prepared to discuss that reading. There will be almost no lecturing, only at those moments where some contextual background is absolutely necessary to understand the text.

Although not a lot is left of the Florence of Dante's time, we will be taking advantage of our living and learning laboratory, Florence, at several points in the course, visiting the Museo "Casa di Dante," the Uffizi Gallery where we will focus on the artists of Dante's own time, some of whom he knew and mentioned in the *Commedia*, and visiting the churches that survive from Dante's time. Our visits to Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella should give us some insight into the different religious orders so important for the Italy of Dante's time and for his poetry, particularly for the *Paradiso*.

As a primary goal of the course is to give the students the experience of reading the entire *Commedia*, making this voyage to the stars along with the character and the author Dante, it is really important to develop a plan to keep up with the reading. We are not talking about many pages, but this is dense, complicated stuff that can't be speed read. You can't get through hell in a hurry! We will begin with the far shorter and more accessible early work by Dante, the *Vita Nuova*, as well selected lyrics that will be made available in

class. But an epic reading voyage will start in earnest week 4. The *Commedia* has 100 cantos, and we are spending 12 weeks on it, so the reading pace should be 8 ½ cantos a week, or a little over one a day, with usually 4 per class. Our discussion pace in class will not be exactly 4 cantos for each class, as certain moments in the poem demand more sustained attention than others. But my strong advice for students is that they try to read a canto every day, perhaps at a set time, and that they try to stay a little ahead of where the class discussion is. A canto a day will keep panic away!

### **Course Materials:**

We will be reading material of three kinds in the course. The uncollected lyrics by Dante (and a very few others) will be made available in class and will not need to be purchased. But the student will need to obtain the text of the *Vita Nuova* and the *Divine Comedy*. I have ordered copies of Stanley Appelbaum's Dover Books translation of the *Vita Nuova*, as it is a serviceable and inexpensive facing-page edition. All three canticles of the *Divine Comedy* (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*) have also been ordered in lineated bilingual editions, in the translation by Robert and Jean Hollander, exactly what you will need to benefit most from the class discussion.

It is also my experience that no one reads the *Commedia* without wishing to frequently consult both the *Aeneid* and the *Bible*, so it would not be a bad idea to have copies of each (easily available for free on the internet) readily available.

Anyone reading Dante today can also take advantage of some extraordinary resources on the internet, and in an appendix to this syllabus, I have listed the websites that I have found most useful in reading and teaching Dante. You are certainly encouraged to take full use of these sites, and material from them will occasionally be used in class discussion.

### **Grading System:**

Your grade for the course will be earned from five components, attendance and participation in class (worth 20% of the grade), two 5-8 page papers (each worth 20%) and a midterm and final exam (each worth 20%). As this is a seminar, the course happens in class, so I expect you to be there. As seminars are discussions, I expect you to participate. What we will discuss in class each week will not be set by me in advance in any formal, pre-determined way: it will be shaped as least as much as what each of you brings to the dialogue (literally 'words across') as me. If you are not naturally active in class participation, let's discuss how we can create an environment in which this changes, and I am happy to give anyone in class a 'status check' on my

assessment of his or her class participation grade halfway through the semester.

Both of the papers are interpretive essays focusing on your ability to analyze works of literature. I am happy if you refer to secondary literature, in which case you must cite your sources, but this is less a research paper in which you learn about the context of what you discuss than an interpretive paper in which you read and analyze the work itself. (There are ways to challenge this distinction, and that is something we will spend some time on across the semester.) The papers will be graded in terms of the quality of their written expression as well as the intelligence of the content, and they will be returned with written comments concerning both aspects. I may well also schedule conferences with students after the first paper if it is clear to me that the quality of the writing isn't up to par, and I would invite students with questions or concerns after the first paper to consult with me as well.

Essay #1 will be focused on a single work of lyric poetry written by Dante or one of his contemporaries. This can be from the *Vita Nuova*, from one of the other works read in class, or other works from the period—your choice. Your task is a formal analysis of the work: what is its form, its structure, and what is the relationship between those formal/structural elements and the theme or topic of the poem? For example, the Italian sonnet (unlike the English sonnet) usually has a turn or *volta* between lines 8 and 9: the sections and rhymes change between the first 8 lines and the final six. Characteristically, there is also a turn in the poem itself, in what it is about, and one can usually relate these formal and thematic characteristics of the poem. Longer forms are more complex, as are pairs or sequences of sonnets, and it would certainly be possible to discuss a group of shorter poems in lieu of discussing a longer *canzone*, a more important lyric form in Dante's time than the sonnet which becomes so prominent later.

Essay #2 should compare two (or at most three) *canti* in the *Commedia*, *canti* that are contiguous or at the same point in different canticles or connected in some other way you discuss. The *Commedia* is unprecedented and unusual among epics in terms of making a larger unit out of a series of smaller ones of this kind that are units in a continuous narrative yet are also distinct and discrete. This is one of the aspects of Dante that modern poets find most sympathetic and most modern. Most readers of the *Commedia* find themselves making connections among individual *canti*, and this helps us create or discern patterns in the large and complex whole that helps make that whole accessible and understandable. Your task in this paper is to describe the connections you see among a set of two or three *canti*: how are they connected?

And how do these canti and the interrelations you describe among them carry forward (or perhaps push back against) the overarching themes of the poem.

In addition, since this is a time when you are in a learning laboratory called Florence, I am open to an extra credit assignment which would be to make a record of the historical and culture sites you visit this semester outside of class (in Florence or elsewhere if you have travel) with whatever reflections you have on these experiences. This can be a traditional paper journal or something more contemporary involving multimedia—your choice as long as it is in a form I can access at the end of the semester. I am willing to use this as a grade enhancer up to a full letter grade depending on the extent and quality of what you produce. If you are planning on submitting such a document at the end of the semester, my recommendation is that we look at what you are producing fairly early in the semester, so we can be assured that we are on the same page.

### **Week by Week Schedule:**

Tuesday, January 25: Introduction: the lyric forms of Italian poetry (the sonnet, the ballata, the canzone, the sestina); visit to “La Casa Dante”

Thursday, January 27: *Vita Nuova* I-XIV (and some related poems by friends of Dante)

Tuesday, February 1: *Vita Nuova* XV-XXVIII and the *dolce stil novo* and Dante’s *primo amico*: selected lyrics of Guido Cavalcanti (“Fresca rosa novella,” “In un boschetto,” “Donna mi prega,” “La forte e nova mia disaventura,” and “Perch’i’ non spero di tornae giammai”)

Thursday, February 3: *Vita Nuova* XXIX-XLII; visit to some of the Florentine churches from Dante’s time (Badia Fiorentina, Santo Stephano al Ponte, Santi Apostoli); good moment to do this given that scenes in the *Vita Nuova* are set in churches, including potentially these actual churches

Tuesday, February 8: The turn to philosophy: lyrics from *Il Convivio*, including “Voi che ‘intentendo,” “Amor che ne la mente mi ragiona” and “Le dolci rimi d’amore”

Thursday, February 10: Dante’s late lyrics, the *rime petrose*: “Io son venuto al punto de la rota,” “Al poco giorno e al gran cerchio d’ombra,” “Amor, tu vedi ben che questa donna,” “Così nel mio parlar voglio esser aspro”;

Tuesday, February 15: *Inferno*, canti 1-3

(NOTE: the schedule indicates which canti we will be discussing in class; given that there is more time between Thursday and Tuesday than between Tuesday and Thursday, my advice for any student on a full course load would be to try to get a canto or so ahead by the Tuesday class. Students should also have read [or re-read] Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid* by the time we begin reading *Inferno*.)

Thursday, February 17: *Inferno*, canti 4-6; visit to Palazzo Vecchio and Bargello, seats of government in Dante's time; good moment to do this given concern with Florentine politics in this section of the poem

Tuesday, February 22: *Inferno*, canti 7-10

Thursday, February 24: *Inferno*, canti 11-14

Tuesday, March 1: *Inferno*, canti 15-18

Thursday, March 3: *Inferno*, canti 19-22; visit to the Baptistry where Dante was baptized

Tuesday, March 8: *Inferno*, canti 23-26

Thursday, March 10: *Inferno*, canti 27-30

Tuesday, March 15: *Inferno*, 31-34

Thursday, March 17: *Purgatorio*, canti 1-4

Spring Break?

Tuesday, March 29: *Purgatorio*, canti 5-8

Thursday, March 31: *Purgatorio*, canti 9-12; visit to Uffizi Gallery to see the work of the artists mentioned in Canto 11

Tuesday, April 5: *Purgatorio*, canti 13-16

Thursday, April 7: *Purgatorio*, canti 17-20

Tuesday, April 12: *Purgatorio*, canti 21-25

Thursday, April 14: *Purgatorio*, canti 26-29

Tuesday, April 19: *Purgatorio*, canti 30-33

Thursday, April 21: *Paradiso*, canti 1-4

- Tuesday, April 26: *Paradiso*, canti 5-8;
- Thursday, April 28: *Paradiso*, canti 9-13; visit to Santa Croce, chief Franciscan church in Florence
- Tuesday, May 3: *Paradiso*, canti 14-18; visit to Santa Maria Novella, chief Dominican church in Florence
- Thursday, May 5: *Paradiso* canti 19-23
- Tuesday, May 10: *Paradiso*, canti 24-28
- Thursday, May 12: *Paradiso*, canti 29-33

Final exam May

**Additional Resources:**

Participating in a Study Abroad program requires that the student abide by the rules and regulations of the Study Abroad program in addition to those that all UH students need to abide by.

If you consider that you need a reasonable accommodation because of the impact of a disability, please contact the KOKUA program (956-7511 or 956-7612). It is located in Room 013 of QLC, and although the program will work with students remotely, obviously it would be preferable to be in contact before departing from O’ahu. I will be happy to work with you and the KOKUA program to meet your access needs related to a documented disability.

Please do not take this class if you cannot attend regularly and cannot be present for the entire course. I understand emergencies happen, so please let me know if you find yourself in an extraordinary situation.

I expect the written work presented for a grade to be your original work. If you draw on the work of others, that indebtedness needs to be documented through proper attribution. If you have any questions about that process or its opposite—plagiarism—please see me before you turn in work to be graded. I am not requiring the use of secondary sources in the papers for the course but many topics will be very difficult to pursue without research using secondary sources. In such a case, proper documentation of your sources is essential, and the MLA Handbook is an appropriate guide to such documentation.

Course grades for this course will be reported using pluses and minuses. The Grade Scale:

A 93-100    A- 90-92

B+ 87-89    B 83-86    B- 80-82

C+ 77-79    C 73-76    C- 70-72

D 60-69

F <60

Please remember that if you are an English major and taking this as an elective, you need to receive at least a C for this course to count towards your degree requirements in English.

Incompletes will be given only if 1) you are unable to finish the final paper or take the exam because of a medical emergency or personal or family crisis; and 2) you make a written request in advance of failing to submit the work and we are able to discuss your request.

### A Note on the Resources for the Study of Dante on the Internet

I suspect that Dante would have loved the internet, and in any case the internet has returned the favor, as there are a number of websites devoted to the study of Dante that are quite useful for the student. This is a short guide to the most useful of these in English.

One of the remarkable aspects of the reception of the *Commedia* was the rise of a rich tradition of commentary on the poem which began almost immediately after Dante's death. Nothing comparable to this exists in the Western tradition, except of course for biblical study. The Dartmouth Dante Project is a remarkable site that has posted more than 75 commentaries on the poem, and through Dante Lab [[dantelab.dartmouth.edu](http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu)], it allows the reader to simultaneously open three windows with the Italian text, the 1867 translation by Longfellow and one or more of these commentaries so that you can simultaneously read the commentary and the passage being commented on in two languages or compare different commentaries on the same passage. Most of the commentaries are in Italian, starting with the 1322 commentary by Dante's son Jacopo, and some are in Latin, but there are 10 in English, including extremely comprehensive ones by C.H. Grandgent, Charles S. Singleton and Robert Hollander.

Robert Hollander was the key figure in the Dartmouth Dante Project, but he was actually a professor at Princeton, and the Princeton Dante Project he also helped create [[etcweb.princeton.edu](http://etcweb.princeton.edu)] provides an on-line version of his and his wife's translation of the *Commedia* along with the standard Italian edition of

the poem by Petrocchi. In addition, it contains the text and translation of all of Dante's other works, a recitation of the poem in Italian (so you can hear what the poem sounds like), and various other things, including a number of maps.

Digital Dante is housed at Columbia University [[digitaldante.columbia.edu](http://digitaldante.columbia.edu)]. It also has the Petrocchi text, the Longfellow translation, and the translation by Columbia faculty member Allen Mandelbaum; you can open any two of these in a facing page format. Each canto has a commentary by another Columbia faculty member, Teodolindo Barolini, the "Commento Baroliniano," and Barolini's commentary—the first digital commentary on the poem—is extremely useful, discussing the poem canto by canto rather than the traditional method of line-by-line. It also has a section called Intertextual Dante, which juxtaposes all of the relevant passages in Ovid with passages in the *Commedia*. [One assumes the Ovid is just a first stage, but so far Ovid is as far as they have gotten.] It also has an audio of the Italian text, some of Dante's other works and the illustrations from three early printed editions of the poem (1472, 1544 and 1568).

The World of Dante [[worldofdante.org](http://worldofdante.org)] is a beautiful though much more focused site sponsored by the University of Virginia that has recordings of all of the liturgical chants and hymns mentioned in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. So if you wonder what the hymn sung by the souls newly arrived in Purgatory, "In exitu Israel," sounds like, you are one click away from hearing a 5 minute recording of it. It also has maps and illustrations of the poem including Botticelli's and Blake's, but it is the music part which I think is most useful to the student today who isn't as familiar with Catholic liturgy as Dante undoubtedly expected his readers to be.

Finally, a relatively new site sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania, Mapping Dante [[mappingdante.com](http://mappingdante.com)], maps all the places mentioned in the *Commedia*, using a contemporary GIS system with a complicated system of layers. If you want to know more about a place mentioned in the *Commedia*, this is the place to look.

All of these sites are English-language sites and easily navigable by English speakers, though of course all but Mapping Dante contain material in Dante's two languages, Italian and Latin. There is of course a parallel world of Italian language websites, and Mapping Dante offers links to the most important of these, but for my money these five sites are more useful and easier to navigate than any of the Italian sites.

Explore and enjoy!