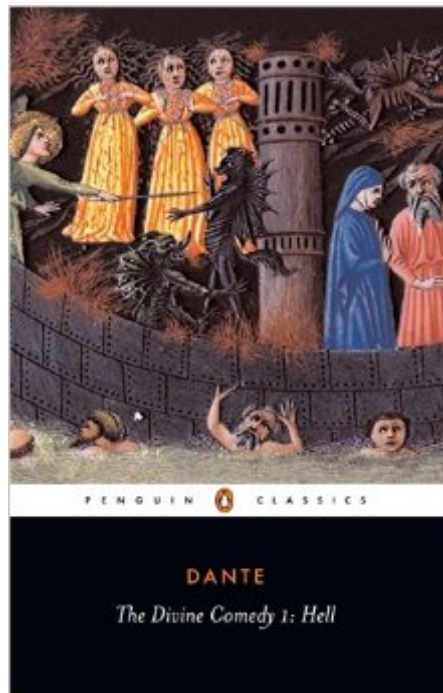


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The Divine Comedy, Part 1: Hell (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The first volume of Dante's *Divine Comedy* Guided by the poet Virgil, Dante plunges to the very depths of Hell and embarks on his arduous journey towards God. Together they descend through the nine circles of the underworld and encounter the tormented souls of the damned - from heretics and pagans to gluttons, criminals and seducers - who tell of their sad fates and predict events still to come in Dante's life. In this first part of his *Divine Comedy*, Dante fused satire and humour with intellect and soaring passion to create an immortal Christian allegory of mankind's search for self-knowledge and spiritual enlightenment. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

This review relates to the volume 1 of Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy*-, Hell; Translated by Dorothy L. Sayers, Penguin Classics, 1949. 346 pp. Other reviewers have spoken to the perceived weaknesses and problems with this particular translation and volume, with Ms. Sayers' "Introduction" and "Notes." Perhaps one should be warned before entering its portals, as constructed by Ms. Sayers, that this is not an "easy" Hell to assimilate. Yet, at the beginning of her "Introduction," she

presents the offering in an inviting fashion: "The ideal way of reading -The Divine Comedy- would be to start at the first line and go straight through to the end, surrendering to the vigour of the story-telling and the swift movement of the verse, and not bothering about any historical allusions or theological explanations which do not occur in the text itself. That is how Dante himself tackles his subject." Some readers may not find Ms. Sayers' translation to be one that lends itself to "swift movement of the verse." The value here, however, is the wealth of information provided in both the "Introduction", the Notes, and in the map drawings which clearly help the mind's eye understand the "lay-out" of Hell as depicted by Dante. The value of Ms. Sayer's "Introduction" is its clear presentation of her view of Dante, his work, his value, his meaning, and his emphases. She concentrates on the Images of Hell and on the Christian doctrine implicit in the work.

Let's begin with Dante. Called "the divine poet" (hence the adjective attached to his humbly titled *Commedia*), it is a difficult moniker to argue with, not because Dante is writing of heaven but because his imagery, his imagination, and his humility are true imitations of the creative activity of God. Dante is a sublime "sub-creator" to use the coinage of JRR Tolkien. If you can read the *Commedia* and not be moved to tears, one is tempted to doubt your humanity for Dante portrays the race in all its beauty and putridness and denies neither. He neither celebrates mankind's faculties and achievements beyond their due nor fears to recognize the vileness of which humans are capable. And it is Cantic II, the poet's ascent through Purgatory, which stirs so deeply the soul and inspires the very penitence and hope of purgation which Dante describes there. One need not be a Roman Catholic or ascribe to Purgatory as doctrine in order to recognize and appreciate what Dante has done in describing the landscape of repentance and hope. (Being a Christian may help, but even on this point one suspects that the divine poet may well perform the function of evangelist, as well as exegete, and lead the searching soul to beatific vision of its own.) Clearly his purpose is not merely to describe what sinners of the past are doing in the afterlife to purify their souls for Paradise, but also to inspire his contemporary readers (who are, of course, yet living when the poem is published in 1321) to examine themselves just as the joyful penitents do on the cornices of Mount Purgatory. It is refreshing--a sort of glorious wound, the healing of which leaves one stronger and more whole than he had been before the hurt. But what of the translation?

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