

BBC Radio 4 - Dante 2021 -  
**BBC Dante's Inferno**  
*"The Great Poet in the XXI century"*



700 years have passed since the Great Poet disappeared. Within these 700 years, there have been two World Wars, two Industrial Revolutions, planets and stars received a name; hundreds of great minds have succeeded one another. People have questioned God's existence as the human being. But 700 years did not stop Dante from shaking up our lives. He conditioned not only his fellow citizens, as we are, but the worldwide population.

Alighieri and the Divine Comedy's fame has been commemorated by UK's most-streamed broadcasting channel, the BBC, with a 3-episode podcast, each one dedicated to one of the Dantesque canticles.

The first one, which commemorates Dante's Inferno, follows this reign's rules: the podcast host, journalist Katya Adler simulates Dante by being accompanied by a Virgil-like guide, doctor Margaret Kean, professor at ST. Hilda's College, Oxford. During this episode, they will show the audience how much Dante is still relevant to our culture and society.

First of all, what is Dante's Hell like?

The First Reign is conical-shaped (it looks like a tornado) and its diameter narrows when descending. Well, the hellholes' diameter is not the only thing that changes when going down; in fact, the deeper you go, the more the sins for which you have to pay the infinite penalty are worse, more devious, and cruel. After all, the harshness of the penalty is proportional to the weight of the sin you committed in your past life that takes place by retaliation, in being similar or opposite to the damn's fault.

*"Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita | mi ritrovai per una selva oscura | ché la diritta via era smarrita."*

*"Midway upon the journey of our life | I found myself within a forest dark | for the straightforward pathway had been lost."*

This is the first triplet of Dante's Inferno. In the night between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> April 1301, Dante stands in a dark forest and has just lost the right path. He trembles, he is scared: he has never seen such a deep darkness and he immediately feels lost. We should know this feeling very well; who did not get scared during this pandemic? Some people experienced fear for their family, for their health, for their job and their financial means and, sadly, many of us felt this sense of deep loss after losing their loved ones. Dante does more than just describing our deepest feelings, he sets an example on how to respond to all of this fear. Like Dante did not stop along the way to self-pity, our hosts encourage us to break the ice, start a new path and trust the process.

The dark wood represents the number of doubts that lie inside us and that Covid 19 brought to life. Dante starts this canticle by saying that he had lost the right path, which means that during his youth he had moved away from God and the “correct” lifestyle. Just like him, we are at a time when we started questioning ourselves and our way of living.

After meeting Latin poet Virgil’s soul, who will be Dante’s guide through Hell and Purgatory, they come across Charon, the infernal helmsman. He must deliver the spirits that will start their eternal punishment from one side to the other of the Acheron river. He is the first character who resembles a law bringer because he hits with the paddle all the darns that do not want to come aboard. As Katya Adler reminds us, Dante seems to love the vigilantes and their punishments; in fact, he describes them in a pretty accurate way. His graphic style is also used to describe famous characters as Paolo and Francesca, lashed by the wind of their passion, and also Bertran de Born, who wanders among the sowers of discord, carrying his head as if it were a lantern.

The very first judge in the whole poem is Minos, the legendary Cretan king, the Minotaur’s father. He is described by Dante as a creature equipped with a long sneaky tail that wraps around the damned’s bodies as many times as the number of the hellhole they will be put in. The tail behaves like an algorithm that, with mathematical precision, gives just one correct answer. But Dante seems not to accept this mechanism very much because its answer is not thorough. According to his opinion, some souls should find themselves in several holes at the same time. A literary comparison could be done with the function of Harry Potter’s Sorting Hat. It is used to determine the students’ Houses but it often finds it difficult to choose because in the kid many contrasting aspects (that distinguish different Houses) occur.

Here we have another Dantesque admonishment: we must not pigeonhole people, watching them from just one point of view. We have always to consider that as human beings we are made of plurality.

Proceeding down in the infernal abyss, halfway down, more or less, Dante and Virgil reach the hole of the Simoniacal Popes, that during their past life bought and sold religious offices. Dante appears to be harshly critical against this type of dooms and against the Catholic Church in general, which was already showing the first signs of corruption. In his masterpiece, Dante inserts his contemporary Popes and he also predicts the damnation of the detested Pope in charge at the time, Boniface VIII, who is still alive when Dante writes the Comedy.

In the Divine Comedy, Dante does not only put contemporary figures but also biblical, mythical, and classical ones. The greatest of all is Ulysses, the well-known Homeric hero. Dante throws him among the counselors of fraud, after having imagined the conclusion of the Odyssey. The two experts agree in saying that the Florentine poet loved giving conclusions to unfinished stories. Dante imagines that Ulysses, pushed by his irrepressible curiosity, convinced his crew to surpass the Pillars of Hercules, the uncrossable limit of the human knowledge but there was no happy ending: as soon as they passed the Strait of Gibraltar, the ship found itself in the middle of a whirlpool and sank with the whole crew inside.

The reason why Dante puts Ulysses in Hell is the fact that he encouraged his fellows to embark on a journey with no clear end and against the divine order.

Anyway, the Great Poet’s behavior with this soul, that is imprisoned in a double tongue of fire (containing the souls of the two best friends Ulysses and Diomedes), is very different from that used with other darns; he still admired Ulysses’ wit and appears to be surprised when finding him down in Hell.

In this podcast, the flames where the counselors of fraud are put are often compared to the populists’ ardor. In fact, Ulysses convinced his crew with sweet words to start a journey with not an assured end. Similarly, Dante had already attacked the populists of his time, who were proposing no real solution to

the urgent problems they used to draw attention to. The two presenters mention today's populist movements in France, Germany, and Italy that carry on intriguing slogans but do not give any answer to today's tragic situation, like the current pandemic.

The poetry in Ulysses' canto is phenomenal (according to many experts, it is one of the highest points in the whole *Commedia*). There is more than the attack on populism. Many questions are still ongoing; 'can you see out of your own restrictions?' or 'can you go off the map or rewrite it?'. Ulysses wants to leave Europe.

*"I've been wondering what the special place in Hell looks like for those who promoted Brexit without giving a sketch of plan on how to carry it safely"* - former European Council President Donald Tusk on unprepared Brexit promoters

Katya Adler states that Donald Tusk is not wrong when talking of a special place in Hell for Brexit promoters; Ulysses is the first who does a sort of Brexit, an exit from a preconceived order.

Furthermore, except for the unhappy ending, Ulysses leverages his mates' bravery and thirst for knowledge. Reading between the lines, we can find Dante's clear admonition: we should use our intellect but always reflect on where free-thinking could take us.

The curators of this episode often dwell on Dante's ability to describe the places and the infernal creatures in a very detailed way, so that we can still imagine them. During the centuries, this attraction to horror inspired many authors, poets, directors (for instance, let's think of Stanley Kubrick), and video game developers.

The expert in technology Ken Hollings explains that the majority of virtual realities in video games follow the Virgilian *katabasis*, which is also used in Dante's *Inferno*.

According to Hollings' opinion, Dante is very useful for developers for different reasons.

First of all, he is the first one to create a virtual reality; the dark wood, in fact, represents a portal to a different universe.

Moreover, he gives us the sense of an organized and carefully modulated line of experience, using a tremendous architectural structure.

But the aspect that immediately strikes a chord with a XXI century video game player is the fact that Dante himself is the central avatar. The presence of an avatar is crucial in modern games because it allows the player to be fully immersed in the game. Similarly, the Poet tells the story by being part of the world he created, forging an indissoluble bond between reality and imagination.

The last aspect of the *Divina Commedia* that arrived hundreds of years before the video games invention is the fact that it is made of specific levels and each of these levels has what is known as a 'boss', an unexpected, big, and terrible figure. The boss of *Inferno* is Lucifer, the one of *Purgatory* is Beatrice and the one of *Paradise* is God. Dante is going to be tested against them, like any respectable video game.

In 2010, a video game came out, called "Dante's *Inferno*". Although its purpose is to celebrate the *Divine Comedy*, many features of this game do not respect the tradition at all, starting from the characters. Dante is represented like a knight templar in crusades and Beatrice, well, she looks more like something we would find in a *Playboy* magazine rather than the angel-woman Dante used to refer to.

The thing that lasts is infernal horror, often described by Dante in every detail.

The only character whose past cannot be told by the Poet is Ugolino Della Gherardesca's one, one of the most terrifying characters in the whole *Comedy*. The legend says (although there is no evidence of truth) that he perpetrated the worst sin of all: cannibalism. He was incarcerated with his little kids in the Muda tower, after internal struggles in Pisa, and somebody narrates that, gone mad

because of hunger, he ate his children one by one. Dante limits himself to drawing him with animal traits but does not mention his past. It seems he wants us to investigate or give our own conclusions.

Even in this passage, Dante leaves an important message: sometimes we can become our own monster, we can become the worst we could ever get.

Like Katya Adler and Margaret Kean remind us, Dante's greatness lies in his ability to punctuate the narration with moral lessons that lasted throughout the centuries. By digging in humans' souls, he became the Virgil for our lives.

## **Peter Brown - Dante at 700 - his impact on British culture**

### ***1 pellegrinaggi verso la futura gente***

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On March, 26<sup>th</sup> 2021, Mr. Peter Brown, director of the British School FVG, held a conference about Dante's impact on British culture and literature.

As soon as he started talking, he admitted that this topic would have been something very challenging to talk about because of some 'elephants in the room'.

The first one is caused by T. S. Eliot's speech when he received the Nobel prize for literature, in 1948. He stated that "*Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them: there is no third*". This is such a definite statement, but we could all agree that maybe the "*third one*" mentioned by Eliot could be the scientific world.

Furthermore, there is no direct mention to Dante in any of Shakespeare's writings or plays; so, if one of the two halves of the modern world says nothing about the other one, what is the connection between them?

But probably the biggest issue that occurs is that Dante's Divine Comedy had not been translated into English for almost 500 years.

Therefore the question arises, where does Dante's influence come from? And who has transmitted or mediated his work?

For a better understanding of the Florentine Poet's impact on British culture, professor Peter Brown divided the history section that goes from the Miraculous Year 1300 to 2021 into four pilgrimages, understood as motions of people, ideas, and cultures:

1. the Dawn, that considers more or less the XIV century
2. the shifting of the Renaissance from Italy to England (1400-1600) → the advent of the impact of Italian culture on the British one
3. the Grand Tour, made possible after the Thirty Years' War
4. the first translation of the Divine Comedy (1785) - from that moment on, the English language has become the one which almost all the books are translated into (40:1 ratio).

Professor Brown decided to proceed backward, from the most recent pilgrimage to the eldest one, in order to discover and analyze any quibble along the way.

### **Dante's Impact on British Culture**

#### **1785 - 2021**

#### **following the first translation of the Divine Comedy into English**

During the 200 years that divide the present year from 1785, the year of the very first publication of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in English, we can spot two different kinds of Dantesque impact on the English art and literature: a quantitative one and a qualitative one.

In regards to the quantitative one, Mr. Brown chose to look for newspaper articles that were linked to Dante or his masterpiece.

After a long night spent on the Times and the Guardian online archives, he came up with the tune of 1100 articles, without mentioning more than 300 BBC programs (including the one which the previous article was about!).

He also found out a funny but important fact, proving that the Great Poet is considered a role model also for children; one of the last BBC programs about Dante is for elementary school students, and it is broadcasted in Welsh!

If we have a look at the qualitative aspect, we can already see a deep influence on the next few generations of literati, such as the Romanticists, Wordsworth, Blake, Eliot, the Modernists, and Seamus Heaney, a contemporary poet who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1995, and the jury's motivation was: *"for works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt everyday miracles and the living past"* (speaking of Dante's poetry).

But Dante affected also a huge number of visual artists, such as Blake (mentioned also above, because he was both a poet and a painter) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (who bears the name of the Great Poet himself), and his 'Beata Beatrix', in which he added a little panel in the background, showing Dante in the act of giving the *Commedia* to future generations.



W. Blake, *Divina Commedia*, 1824-1827



D. G. Rossetti, *Beata Beatrix*, 1864-1870 - D. G. Rossetti, *Pia de' Tolomei*, 1868

### **Dante's Impact on British Culture post Restoration (1660) the Grand Tour**

After the blood-soaked Thirty Years' War, people started to travel again. Thanks to this new freedom, the Grand Tour, a long journey across the European continent, undertaken by the aristocrats' scions to improve their knowledge, developed. English offsprings could now go and visit the places they had just heard of and go looking for common roots with the ancient glory. One of the most important stops was obviously Italy.

It was a real pilgrimage, not for religious purposes, but for educational ones.

The Grand Tour promoted the translation of the Divine Comedy and the establishment of Anglo-Italian societies in Florence and Venice. But, most importantly, it developed a sort of deification of Dante's figure, so that the 'pilgrims' arrived in droves in Ravenna, just to touch his gravestone.

### **Dante's Impact on British Culture 1400 - 1600 the shifting of the Renaissance from Italy to England**

Professor Peter Brown firstly declared and proved that the Italian Renaissance arrived in several and repeated waves, definitely without drowning out the previous culture.

In fact, it was very difficult for the Italian culture to stick to Protestant England, which harshly attacked and precluded everything that had something to do with the Catholic Church.

Those were difficult times for poets who were attracted by Italian literature. For example, Ben Johnson<sup>1</sup> was incarcerated for having 'annoyed' the Protestant Church.

But why then the Italian Renaissance got open in such a closed-minded environment?

It arrived in waves mediated by merchants, diplomats, and pilgrimages.

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<sup>1</sup> XVI century English dramatist.

The merchants were definitely the luckiest social class because they could travel across many countries and they carried much more than products to sell; they carried ideas, cultures, and knowledge. Mr. Brown called them “the internet of the time”.

People could also order very precious manuscripts that could have arrived months or years later.

We can spot an example of the diplomats’ movement of culture from an anecdote related to a picture.



G. Gower, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 1588

This painting, made just after Queen Elizabeth I’s win on the Invincible Armada<sup>2</sup>, shows her in the act of putting her little hand on a globe, representing her power over the whole world. Some writings say that she received three Venetian ambassadors (that came to London to inform her Majesty of the attempt to stop the Ottoman Empire) while she was posing. And from the report that the three ambassadors wrote, we know that Queen Elizabeth used to speak Italian fluently (“*disse la Maestà Sua medesima in lingua nostra*”). But why? After all, we know that her father Henry VIII introduced the Anglican Church and that the Queen herself was very intolerant to Catholics.

Well, by having always lived at court, she always could meet Italian and other countries’ diplomats and learn various languages.

### **Dante’s Impact on British Culture prior to 1400 the Dawn**

There are several reasons for which the year 1300 has been defined as ‘the year of miracles’.

One of those is the realization of the cycle of frescoes in the Cappella Degli Scrovegni (1300-1305), in Padua, by Giotto. The greatness of this work of art was transmitted verbally and its majesty grew exponentially, so that, after a few centuries, Padua became a necessary stop during the Grand Tour.

1300 was also the imaginary year of the starting of Dante’s journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

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<sup>2</sup> Spanish navy (under King Philip II) who tried to attack and conquer Great Britain in 1587.

The truth is that we have not answered to the original question yet.

How did Dante arrive in the English culture?

The tradition says that Chaucer brought Dante over the Channel, but Dante and Chaucer were not contemporaries; so how did Chaucer know Dante?

They 'met' through two Italian contemporaries of Chaucer: Francesco Petrarca and Giovanni Boccaccio.

In particular, it is almost certain that Petrarca and Chaucer met multiple times.

They both used to travel a lot. Chaucer was indeed a public official and it is very likely that during one of his diplomatic missions in Italy, he met Petrarca for the first time in Genova, in 1373.

They probably met once more in 1378. Chaucer was in Milan to the Visconti on a secret mission. Here, besides having known commander Sir John Hawkwood, he participated in many events along with Francesco Petrarca.

And after having returned to London in 1378, he started composing his masterpiece, "The Canterbury Tales". This poem narrates the story of a pilgrimage from London to the tomb of Saint Thomas Becket, in Canterbury. During the journey, each character tells a story to kill time. This story is based on real pilgrimages, such as the Via Francigena.

In this poem, there are many similarities and allusions to Dante, proving that Chaucer had already come across the Divine Comedy.

For instance, Chaucer, just as Dante is the 'founder' of the Italian language, is the first to use the vernacular language and raise it as the language of poetry. We can definitely say that English literature derives from an only man: Geoffrey Chaucer.

A direct allusion to the Great Poet occurs in the Ellesmere Manuscript of "The Canterbury Tales". In the Monk's tale, in fact, the friar tells the story of Conte Ugolino (narrated by Dante in canto XXXIII of the Inferno) and then he cites directly the Great Poet, inviting his audience to consult his masterpiece.

To sum up, Dante gave two things to Chaucer: the aspiration to transform a low language into a high and educational one and the push to write in English.

We can say, then, beyond any doubt, that Dante is, in a way, the father of the English language too and that we all are the *futura gente* who received the gift of a new language.

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Giorgia Tribos & Silvia Degano