

BBC Radio 4 - Dante 2021 -

## **Dante's Purgatory**



**“If you're going through hell...keep going”**

- Winston Churchill

...and that's what Dante did.

Sure, there were a bit of faintings here and there, and he might not have been exactly an intrepid knight in a shining armour but he did make sure not to stray from the right path again, and that's what led him all the way to Purgatory which is where our part of the story begins.

And yes, it can sound old-fashioned, moralizing and religious but really, this is all about a journey to self-improvement and hope for a better, more just world. And for many of us, regardless of our religious beliefs, that is very 21st century, just like many other issues he encounters while traveling through hell, such as rotting society, greed, misuse of power and political divisions.

These are certainly not very optimistic, lighthearted topics, but luckily, Dante, throughout his journey, gets the chance to finally move from the hallucinating sense of doom that drapes like a fog over hell, to the bright glimmers of hope, that characterizes one of the main themes of Purgatory.

What Purgatory really shows is that a revolution isn't something that happens in a moment; for meaningful change to happen, it takes work, it takes reflection and, most importantly, it takes humility. Often people at different times and in different places have read Dante's works and have found something that really resonates for their own lives. Dante offers us a template through the most difficult moment in his life and guides us, as Virgil once did with him, helping us to overcome difficulties by making us reflect deeply.

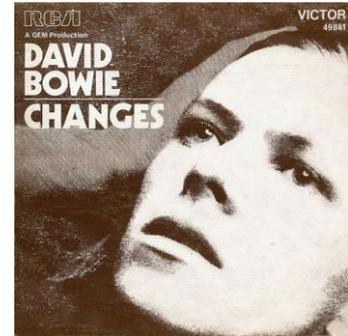
Purgatory teaches us that some wrongs can be righted, and that we can learn from our mistakes; as long as we work for it, we're allowed to reach for Paradise, or at

least, in the real world, we're allowed to reach a better, more meaningful existence. That's why Dante's journey through Purgatory also resonates with modern day great thinkers.

**"Real change takes both humility and time"**  
As the great David Bowie once said..."changes"

Hell is so vivid and teaches you all of these worldly lessons and brings up all of these big questions. But why, then, should you read Purgatory, what is it that makes it so special?

Well, from the very beginning of Purgatory, you feel a sense of new life, renewal, after the darkness of hell, you open with dawn, you have music, you have the stars. *The world is there to be enjoyed!*



***"Once I left the morbid air which weighed so heavy on my eyes and heart began afresh to bring my eyes delight."***

Dante sees Purgatory as a place which is much more joyful than his contemporaries imagined it. And what is really important is that it is not just a place where you suffer punishment, but it's also a place where you undergo a psychological and moral change. The other thing is, the people, the souls that Dante meets in Hell are memorable ones, many of them are great characters, but they're self-obsessed, they're constantly self-justifying their actions. On the other hand, the souls in Purgatory are not just themselves in a process of change but they're also interacting with other people. They're continuously learning .

**"Singing harmoniously together means listening to each other"**

Dante, from the very beginning of this long narrative poem introduces music and singing, but it is the singing that emerges communally, and in order to sing communally we have to listen to each other before we push our own voices forward, and here we have that sense of interaction and integration again.

We have to remember that the society that Dante lived in is a polarized factional society, in fact he uses Purgatory as a way into exploring what a better society might be.

The souls have a more collectivistic sense of redemption and pain, they are never alone as single individuals, they're always part of a crowd of other souls and there aren't monologues anymore, as in the Inferno, here, they all sing unanimously and go through their suffering together. And this is another pivotal topic of this canticle.

All the way through the journey through Purgatory Dante reflects on the meaning of freedom: you can't have meaningful freedom if you are not engaging deeply with the community that you live in. Dante doesn't perceive freedom as the fulfillment of immediate desires, that isn't true freedom to him because he believes that it leads men to become prisoners of their instincts.

## **CANTO 8**

***"It was by now, the hour that turns to home, the longing thoughts of seamen, melting hearts the day they said goodbye to dearest friends. And when by love, the pilgrim***

***new to this, his peers to hear far off the evening bell that seems to mourn the dying of the day. As I began to blank by hearing out and gaze in wonder at a single soul, who, risen up, hand raised, asked all to hear. The soul first joined his palms then lifted them, eyes fixed towards the Orient as though to say to God for nothing else I care "Te lucis ante" issued from his lips with such devotion, and each note so sweet, it made me wonder out of conscious thought, then, sweetly and devoutly, all the rest their eyes all turned to those supernal wheels picked up from him and sang the hymn in full".***

During his long reflections the souls move on and progress upwards towards Paradise or they hope to reach the next stage.

Time is absolutely critical to this and one of the things that makes Purgatory different from the other realms is that time is present. We can see the beginning of the day, the end of the day and therefore the strong sense of the passage of time is strongly highlighted and this is essential to the process of change. And there's a wonderful moment where the pilgrim sees the sun going down and describes that moment in time.

**"The roots of the 2008 banking crisis, were in 14th century Florence"**

An unexpected aspect of the much bigger topic of politics and corruption that Dante heavily refers to during the whole Comedy is economics. Economics in fact poses a profound ethical dilemma in the author; questions like: is it okay to make money just through money? Is it okay for a city like Florence to just keep on getting richer and richer, even if it means demolishing the city walls?

Dante's rather obsessed, equally in Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, about the corrupting nature of money and power. Whether public figures, and kind of symbols of this issue like bankers are cast in Hell, in Purgatory, Dante wonders on how a society would look like if financial measures of value were taken away, and were enforced rather than psychological, moral and ethical spiritual measures of value.

**"Admiral" Beatrice**

***"There is not one gram of blood in me that does not tremble now. I recognize the signs of ancient flame"***

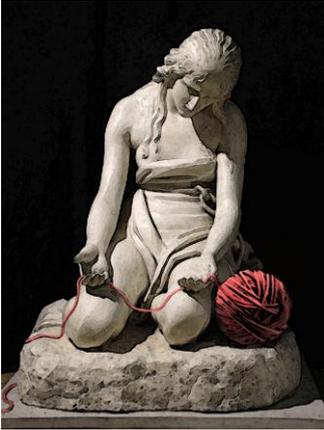
Here we are, at the end of the second part of Dante's journey, which could really be considered a whole different journey itself weren't it so deeply connected in matters of topics and emotions with both Inferno and Paradise.

It might not seem so, but the ability this canticle has to maintain its own individuality, its own characteristics and peculiarities, while being so thoroughly intertwined with the other two, is what makes so that Purgatory is not just a "passage", a bridge one has to cross to go from Hell to Paradise.

The whole of it, but remarkably the ending, in fact represents a climax, not just in Dante's poem but also in the entirety of the poet's life.

Why is that so? It's because the moment he's been longing for forever has arrived: Beatrice has finally made her apparition.

## **"A lady now appeared to me"**



But Beatrice is not at all how we had expected her to be. Beatrice does not represent the idea we had in our minds of a lovely, gentle, courtly lady.

Her apparition is a surprise because, beautiful as she clearly is, she's also got harsh words for Dante, she doesn't console him. She doesn't even greet him with warm words of welcome.

Poor Dante who's still deeply emotional because of the sudden departure of his other beloved guide, whose tremendous and largely cultivated friendship is shattered into pieces in mere seconds.

And you'll ask yourselves: "why is Dante crying, if everything's going according to the plan? Virgil's back in hell, where he's supposed to be according to the Christian interpretation of the afterlife that Dante's clearly a believer of, and Beatrice is finally in front of him, what is he upset for?"

The thing is, Dante realizes that the hardest part of his journey is about to begin: no more second-hand remorse and shallow pity: it is now time for the traveler to work on himself. That's when Beatrice's presence reveals its purposes: she's not there to play Dante's lover, quite the opposite, as she's about to put him through the most intense sort of psychological torture, force him to face up to his own past, and to his own failings.

Beatrice is really interesting because at this point she's not a comfortable person for Dante to be with.

Most importantly, even just the fact that Beatrice talks so much is in itself a bit of a shock to any reader who was used to the sort of traditional love poetry where the woman was silent, the poet would write poetry to the beloved, but the beloved never said anything in return. Beatrice talks and talks and talks and Dante finds this really challenging, but that challenge is exactly what's needed for Dante in order to be able to move on in this journey to Paradise.

**"Dante, that Virgil is no longer here, do not yet weep, do not yet weep for that. A different sword cut, first, must make you weep."**

Eventually, Beatrice will lead him to Heaven. Dante will reach the holiness, he'll finally gaze and bath into the dazzling light.

Just like Theseus did with Adriane's thread, Dante will get out of the infernal "labyrinth" of his life thanks to Beatrice's help. But, seriously, what would the world be like without women?/What would become of the world without women?

**"I came back from that holiest of waves remade, refreshed as any new tree is, renewed, refreshed with foliage anew, pure and prepared to rise towards the stars."**

And all together, with lockdown, we think there's been a lot of reexamining of personal and societal priorities. So the best thing that we can do and that we should do is to grasp the meaning of Dante's valuable lessons and use them to create a better society and overcome all adversities because there's still hope for a

better future after all we went through. And maybe, one day, we'll be able to reach the stars just like Dante did.

### **"PER ASPERA AD ASTRA"**

Denida Doda e Giada Braidotti

