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# ITALY CENTER

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 SPRING HILL COLLEGE

**ENG 321**

## **Dante's *Commedia***

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES**

In this course we will undertake a close reading of the first two of the three canticles of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. We will focus our class discussions upon specific episodes (in bold on the calendar below) in order to draw out and discuss the contemporary significance of this complex text from our Occidental culture's Medieval past. We will seek to uncover the ways in which the poet blends elements of classical pagan literary culture with his own medieval literary traditions as well as his Christian belief system in order to create a text that still generates interest today, poetically, ethically, politically, historically, and simply as a pleasurable read. Several catabatic precedents from both classical epic poetry and medieval mystical literature will supplement our study of the *Commedia* in an effort to further illuminate the literary backgrounds of the poem. We will also work on our essay writing technique and hopefully hone our reading and interpretive skills (what we mean when we say "critical" skills in literary language).

Therefore, the measurable objective of the course will be for you to demonstrate that you are capable of writing two convincing short critical essays upon the *Commedia* or a topic related to the study of the poem (i.e. the poem's approach to history, to theology, to ethics, to mysticism, its genre, its inter- or intra-textuality, its imitators, its *fortuna*, etc., etc.).

### **COURSE PROCEDURES AND REQUIREMENTS**

The calendar below represents the reading for which you will be responsible for each class session; it also tells you, above each assignment, the topic we are most likely to discuss about the reading. The numbers in bold represent specific *canti* upon which I would like to focus the in-class discussion—although questions and/or comments on the other *canti* are also welcome and we can be flexible if there is a general consensus to discuss episodes other than those that I have chosen. This class will be run as a seminar therefore I urge you once again strongly to take notes while you read and to come to class prepared to ask questions, comment, complain about, trip on, and generally to explore the day's reading assignment.

Beyond regular attendance, participation in the class discussions, and the completion of the requisite reading described above, students will be expected to complete two (5-7 pp.) writing assignments. These essays will deal with 2 different *canti*/loci/topics/critical stances/historical interpretations or what have you of your own choosing which approach the *Commedia* in some way. The first paper will be due on Dec. 19th (no later than the end of that day's class session) and the second no later than the end of our TBA final exam session during the last week of the semester.

Grades will be based on the written work with positive or negative considerations for attendance and participation in the class discussions: roughly that's 40% for each paper and 20% for participation and attendance. Note: A student who does not complete one of the written assignments or who exceeds 5 absences will not receive a passing grade regardless of the percent values of the individual assignments on the grounds that they have not completed the course requirements.

### **Spring Hill College Italy Center Attendance Policy**

Attendance at all classes is required of all students. Students are expected to arrive at class on time, having completed the week's course readings and assignments, with a pen, paper and books in-hand. Students are expected to read their email daily to keep abreast of important academic and safety related issues. It is the student's responsibility to notify his/her teachers of an anticipated absence, make arrangements to complete the work, and then complete the work as agreed. In the event a student misses more than TWO classes he/she will automatically be marked down one grade point. A student may be absent twice before being penalized. For example, if a student expects to receive a "B" for a course, but has more than two unexcused absences on his/her report, the final grade for the course will be dropped to a "B-". Excused absences require a note from the Spring Hill medical Doctor (Stephen Williams, M.D.) or from Dr. Todd Waller. Any change in status that will result in absence, the student must contact their professor immediately. It is a student's responsibility to keep him/herself informed of pending strikes, changes in air travel and any other potential obstacles that may prohibit one from being at class on time. Excuses related to travel delays will not be accepted. Examinations missed by reason of absence must be made up at the convenience of the instructor. Students are required to familiarize themselves with the course schedule and should not attempt to make travel plans that may conflict with course meetings, on site visits, and exams.

### **Accommodation Policy**

In order to be eligible for accommodations (i.e. extended time on exams and tests) you are required to present an official letter from your home institution indicating that you may receive support. The letter which normally comes from one's home campus Center for Academic Support must be presented to me and also to Dr. Waller prior to the Italy Center drop / add deadline (see Italy Center Webpage for calendar deadlines / <http://kudzu.shc.edu/italycenter/>). A note provided by a home physician or counselor will not suffice. Any information provided will be treated as private and confidential.

### **Grading**

Both papers: 40% each  
Participation, attendance, and reading: 20%  
Detailed instructions/guidelines for writing a college level essay in the field of literary criticism will be distributed in class.

### **Participation**

*A-range:* Student has clearly read and thought about the texts under discussion and has contributed in nearly every discussion with thoughtful questions and comments that demonstrate an engagement with the readings, the presentations, and their classmates.

*B-range:* Student has clearly read and thought about the texts under discussion and has contributed regularly in discussion with thoughtful questions and comments that demonstrate an engagement with the readings, the presentations, and their classmates.

*C-range:* Student has read but has not demonstrated thoughtfulness towards the articles under discussion, or student has not clearly thoughtfully read on a regular basis. OR Student has thoughtfully read on a regular basis but has not contributed in discussion regularly with thoughtful questions and comments that demonstrate an engagement with the readings, the presentations, and their classmates.

*D-range:* Student has not regularly read the articles under discussion OR student has not contributed in discussion on an intermittent basis.

*F-range:* Student has not regularly read the articles AND student has not contributed in discussion on an intermittent basis.

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism and academic dishonesty/impropriety on examinations, papers and any other assignments will not be tolerated and will result in disciplinary action. Please read the appropriate pages in the Student Handbook (to be found in Dr. Waller's office).

### **Costs / Estimated Out of Pocket Expenses**

This course includes a one-day field trip to Florence. Although transportation costs will be covered by Spring Hill, students will need some pocket money for lunch and/or snacks. 25-30 Euro should cover it.

### **A note on My Teaching Method**

I do not believe that I (or anyone else) can coerce or cajole anyone into "learning." Rather I believe that intellectual progress is made through the sharing and discussion of reactions and interpretations. Therefore this course will be conducted as a seminar and be totally dependent upon your individual contributions and courtesy. Obviously, then, it is absolutely necessary that each of you take control of your own education not only for your own sakes, but also in accordance with your responsibility to the rest of those participating in this class. You must both keep up with the reading and begin the process of digesting the material by coming to class with something either to say or ask about it. **I strongly recommend that you take notes while reading with both questions and observations and that you come to class prepared to challenge and/or benefit from the group's discussion.** You cannot depend on me to lecture on material that you have not read, nor will I accept the role of monitor for your reading or policeman for discourtesy to the class during the discussions. Concerns of this kind should be voiced and dealt with by the community during the class sessions. Remember that I am only one in a group of people here to explore and learn from this very interesting group of texts.

That said, I am extremely available both in class and out to offer my expertise and experience to help you digest and write about this material. (I also have a lot of experience living, studying, and now teaching here in Florence and I offer a sympathetic ear to culture shock concerns as well!) Though I have no official office hours I'm always available for private conferences and very open during the in-class discussions to address both our method and the material of our study if the group as a whole is in agreement as to the utility and feasibility of changing them. All of this is said and done to clarify from the start my particular approach--based on the assumption that we are each mutually dependent individuals demanding of respect and ultimately responsible for our own intellectual progress—and to allow the greatest flexibility in our proceeding so that the most appropriate and useful materials and methods are addressed in this course.

## Required Texts (provided by Spring Hill):

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*  
Dante Alighieri, *Purgatory*

All texts marked with a 📄 on the calendar are to be found in the course photocopy packet.

## CALENDAR

### Session 1: **Course Introduction: Literary and ritual Catabasis**

Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI 📄

### Session 2: **Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry**

Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI 📄

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI 📄

### Session 3: **Backgrounds in Classical Epic Poetry**

Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI 📄

Virgil, *Georgics*, Book IV (Excerpt) 📄

### Session 4: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore and Classical Epic Poetry**

Virgil, *Georgics*, Book IV (Excerpt) 📄

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision* 📄

### Session 5: **Field trip: a peek at Dante's Florence**

### Session 6: **Backgrounds in Medieval Folklore**

Anonymous, *Tundale's Vision* 📄

### Session 7: **Medieval Allegory**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto I - III, **II**

### Session 8: **Lyric in the Epic**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto IV-VII, **V**

### Session 9: **Structure in Medieval Didactic Texts/Aristotle's *Ethics* Personified**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto VIII-XI, **XI**

### Session 10: **Epic Motifs and the *Contrapasso***

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XII-XIV, **XIII**

Virgil, Excerpt from *The Aeneid* 📄

Session 11: **Medieval Exempla and Sins Personified**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XV-XVII, **XV**

Session 12: **Popes in Hell?**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XVIII-XXI, **XIX**

Session 13: **Post-Virgilian Epic and the *Contrapasso* (Lucan and Ovid)**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXII-XXV, **XXV**

Session 14: **Intellectual Autobiography? (Ulysses vs. Augustine/Public vs. Private)**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXVI-XXVIII, **XXVI & XXVII**

John Freccero, "Dante's Ulysses: from epic to Novel" 

Session 15: **End Intellectual Autobiography? & the *Contrapasso* Revisited**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXIX-XXXI, **XXVII/XXVIII**

Session 16: **New Religion Over Old: Isaac and the Father replace Oedipus and Jupiter**

Dante, *Inferno*, Canto XXXII-XXXIV, **XXXII/XXXIII**)

Session 17: **Paper Writing Guidelines**

Session 18: **The Place Between: Purgatory and Religious Folklore**

Jacobus De Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, "The Commemoration of All Souls" 

**Allegory, Exodus, Ulysses and the *Aeneid*: the Journey to Freedom**

Dante, *Purgatory* I-V, **I & II ll. 1-51.**

Session 19: **Classical Stories and Medieval Allegory: The First of Three Dreams**

Dante, *Purgatory* VI-IX, **IX (First essays due)**

Session 20: **Art, Writing and Fame—the Proud**

Dante, *Purgatory* X-XII, **XI**

Session 21: **Politics, Rivers and Envy**

Dante, *Purgatory* XIII-XV, **XIV**

Session 22: **Half Way Home: Theology, Love and the Christian Epic**

Dante, *Purgatory* XVI-XVIII, **XVII& XVIII ll. 1-75**

Session 23: **Another Allegorical Dream and the Sins of Earthly Attachment**

Dante, *Purgatory* XIX-XX, **XIX**

Session 24: **Statius, textual Interpretation and the Christianization of Epic Poetry**

Dante, *Purgatory* XXI-XXIII, **XXI/XXII**

Session 25: **The Last Word on Lyric Poetry I**

Dante, *Purgatory* XXIII-XXV, **XXIV**

Session 26: **The Last Word on Lyric Poetry II**

Dante, *Purgatory* XXVI- XXIX, **XXVI**

Session 27: **The Bible Triumphs as *the Aeneid* Fades Away: the Return of Beatrice**

Dante, *Purgatory* XXX-XXXIII, **XXX**

Session 28: Extra class in case we fall behind. (**All** written work is due.)