

Dante alighieri and publius vergilius maro: a comparison

Literature



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Comparing the lives and work influences of Dante (1265-1321) and Virgil (70 BC- 19 BC) is no easy task. Apart from the obvious fact that these two great Italian writers were 13 centuries apart, many other things differentiate them. Now, to effectively provide a comparison, I would talk about these two great writers individually after which I shall attempt to show a comparison and contrast between the two. The discussion shall predominantly be on the historical, cultural, and personal aspects that molded their lives as well as their works. There would not be any direct literary interpretation of their works in this paper.

I shall discuss Dante first, then proceed to Virgil. Dante Alighieri is the writer of the famous *Divina Comedia* (afterwards to be called as *comedia*). A Roman Catholic and a low aristocrat, he has himself been involved in politics and once experienced being a soldier. A great wanderer and a political exile (Slattery 43), his life was as colorful as that of his spiritual journey in the *Comedia*. Allow me to talk about the philosophical, literary and astronomical influences of the *Comedia* as well as the situation of Florence during his time that greatly influenced how he lived.

The *Comedia*, divided into three books (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*) is Dante's spiritual journey, figuratively represented by him as the main character being lost in the woods and eventually entering hell; the story ends in him entering heaven. He had two guides in his seven-day journey: Virgil (and this is one obvious connection between him and the ancient writer) and Beatrice (a woman that Dante only saw probably twice in his life; it is to her to whom he offered courtly love).

Virgil guides him until purgatory, and Beatrice guides him all throughout paradise. In his journey, he meets and sees people in hell, purgatory and heaven. Some of the important personality he meets, aside from Virgil and Beatrice, would be the following: Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and Francis of Assisi. These are important personalities not only because of their enduring fame but because these people have such a great influence on Dante and on the *Comedia*.

In fact, Aristotle's idea of the universe was adopted by Dante in the *Comedia*, and Aquinas's (also an Aristotelian) philosophy-theology (along with Boethius's) became the philosophical-theological assumption of the *Comedia*. Francis of Assisi has such an impact on Dante's life that he chose to die wearing the Franciscan habit (as he was a Franciscan third order in the latter parts of his life) and be buried in a tomb attached to a Franciscan monastery (Slattery 22). Aristotle's universe wherein the earth is in the center is also Dante's universe.

Aristotle's universe is composed of the earth the ring of the other three elements (water, wind, fire), the planets (the sun included), with the *primum mobile* as the topmost ring (Gilmore and Herbst, "illustration of Aristotle's universe"). This is exactly Dante's universe in the *Comedia*, though this time, heaven, hell, purgatory, and Jerusalem were incorporated in the picture. Jerusalem, hell, and purgatory are on earth, while earthly paradise is a bit elevated from it (Gilmore and Herbst, "illustration of Dante's universe").

Hence, the twists and turns of his journey in the *Comedia* could not entirely be understood nor appreciated without this basic knowledge of Aristotle's universe. A difficulty arises at the end of *Inferno*, for example, when Dante <https://assignbuster.com/dante-alighieri-and-publius-vergilius-marco-a-comparison/>

provides a long description of his and Virgil's escape from hell to purgatory if one works on a different astronomical paradigm. Aside from Aristotle's influence on Dante's universe, Aristotle further influences Dante via Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas is a huge medieval philosopher-theologian and is known to have Christianized Aristotle's philosophy.

Dante is thoroughly familiar with Aristotle's and Aquinas's philosophy. The most obvious influence of Aquinas is that of man's end, that is, beatific vision, wherein the human being is finally united with God in heaven, in knowledge and in love. The Aristotelian-Thomistic philosophy whose theme was all throughout sensed in the *Comedia* would be the idea that man ought to live a life of virtue (i. e. , good habit), the constant struggle for which leads man towards perfection and happiness. Actually, the entire *Comedia* could be summarized by this theme.

As regards Dante's life, much could be said since there have been many accounts of how he lived and how Florence was during his time, though, I wish to limit this discussion on a brief description of Florence's economy, politics, and great achievements in the 13th century. Florence, in Dante's time, was divided politically between the Ghibellines and the Guelfs, the latter further divided between the Bianchis and the Neris (Slattery 43 - 44). Dante was politically with the Biachi, and when this political group was overthrown, he was sentenced to exile.

Nevertheless, these political crises would not be the only characteristic of Florence. Florence was characterized by an unimaginable vigor as an increasing number of immigrants poured in the city (Slattery 45). The times were characterized by innumerable achievements. There is enough reason to <https://assignbuster.com/dante-alighieri-and-publius-vergilius-maro-a-comparison/>

believe that Europe was very much conscious of the scientific method during this time, side by side with the great late medieval achievements in art. Albert the Great and Roger Bacon are names of scientists that predominated during these times, apart from the great philosophers like Thomas Aquinas (Slattery 20-21).

Needless to say, universities were already flourishing during these times. The times were also characterized by theocentrism. People lived and breathed the faith; apparently Dante's attitude was the rule and not the exemption to it (Slattery 34). Knowing such about Dante, let us now turn to Virgil. Little is known about this author, or at least, we do not know as much about him as we know about Dante. For example, the number of his children remains contestable: others say he had 3 while some say he had four, though we know for a fact that he married the daughter of his employer (Harris, paragraphs 3-4).

He worked for a certain Magus, who probably was bailiff or a merchant. He was born from a father who was either a potter or a hired man (Harris, paragraph 2). We are also unsure whether he was commissioned Augustus to write a Roman epic, though again, we are sure that he was friends with the emperor. For certain, Virgil was well educated, a feat since he comes from a family of modest origins, and as such, he must have read as much Greek literature as possible. He studied in Cremona, Milan, and then Rome (Maine, introduction).

Such an education made it easier for him to produce such a magnitude of a story in Rome based upon the Greek Homeric texts. Let me be quick to say that such a patterning should not be judged as plagiaristic in nature as <https://assignbuster.com/dante-alighieri-and-publius-vergilius-marco-a-comparison/>

during those times, it was perfectly acceptable to imitate Greek art, as Rome lived and breathed Greek glory; the standard, as regards literature, was Greek (Maine, introduction). Hence, as far as Virgil was concerned, the Aeneid, his masterpiece, used Homer as a pattern and assumed Greek mythology.

It must be recalled that the Roman gods had Greek counterparts, or better yet, are Greek gods given Roman names. As regards Greek mythology, it must be remembered that the Greek pantheon of gods are anthropomorphic, i. e. , Greek gods are more like super humans. They are not transcendent gods but instead are gods that were very much involved in human affairs and also have human weaknesses. They also have births, though they would not die. Hence, it works on the assumption that gods and humans alike are capable of falling and of all sorts of imperfections; nevertheless, they are still capable of great things.

This theme permeates the whole of the Aeneid. The Aeneid, revolving around the story of Aeneas the Trojan who is to found Rome, is full of Roman virtues as themes at the same time not neglecting weaknesses. There are for example the vicious wrath of Juno and the passionate madness of Dido. Juno stirs the waters of the ocean to make it difficult, if not impossible, for Aeneas to reach Italy, while Dido kills herself as Aeneas neglects to heed her request to stay in Carthage. Virgil was also well educated in philosophy.

In particular, Virgil was interested in Epicureanism (Harris, paragraph 11), Lucretius's Epicureanism. It would be good to go through some of the basic ideologies of Epicureanism since there seems to be the common misconception that Epicureanism is all about pleasure. Sure, Epicureanism is <https://assignbuster.com/dante-alighieri-and-publius-vergilius-marco-a-comparison/>

about pleasure, but not the sort of pleasure that probably enters the mind of many people. Epicurus differentiates between pleasures that are necessary and those that are not necessary. Food and clothing, for example, would be necessary.

He also makes a distinction between pleasure that are worth one's effort and those that are not. Naturally, we become more pleasurable when we live a life of virtue, for example. Contrary to how Epicureans may have been imagined, Epicurus himself lived a very sober and simple life. He ate bread and not much more. He was also a man who had self-restraint, who was not a slave to his passions. Lucretius, on the other hand, is famous for his writings about love, and how certain types of love lead to pain.

Basic among Epicureans is the avoidance of pain, and by pain, obviously, they do not just refer to physical pain. Living a life of passion and neglecting reason is painful, for example. It makes one suffer in the end. For example, an inordinate type of love would make one want to possess the beloved exemplified by biting and all that. Such an intense longing makes one hurt oneself and the beloved in the end. Now, this basic ideology of Epicureanism of aiming for necessary and noble pleasure and avoiding pain is also present in the Aeneid.

Aeneas left Dido since such a passion is inordinate and hence would be painful. Aeneas also chooses the pleasure of living a life of virtue, upholding pietas and all other Roman virtues, since such would lead him towards his end, i. e. , union with his wife and the founding of Rome. Now, after an extensive discussion on Virgil and Dante, we would already be in the position to make a comparison and a contrast. It is obvious that Dante and Virgil
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come from two different familial backgrounds: Dante came from a low-Aristocrat family while Virgil from a modest family.

They also had two different purposes for their magnum opuses: Dante wants to portray his, and probably all human beings' spiritual journey, while Virgil attempts to give a national epic that would act as a foundation for Rome. The two, though both had theological and philosophical assumptions, worked on two different theologies and philosophies. We have seen these two different theologies and philosophies above. Nevertheless, there has always been this relation between Virgil and Dante that ought to be put into words.

Apparently, Virgil's portrayal of Aeneas going to the underworld and leaving it afterwards acted as an inspiration for Dante's *Comedia*. This could be the reason why Dante chose Virgil to be his guide in the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*. Virgil exemplified the human virtues in the *Aeneid* with such precision that Dante chose Virgil to be his natural guide prior to entering the state where the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love are needed (i. e. , heaven). So, in one way or another, in the same way that Aquinas Christianized Aristotle, we could probably say that Dante Christianized Virgil.