Moral Philosophy By Dante Alighieri

Dante Alighieri, a Florence native, practiced moral philosophy, and wrote literature about the afterlife, politics, and his philosophy. He hoped to reform Italy by expressing his ideas in literature to inform society of the corruption in church and state. He wrote the La Vita Nuova, which outlines his philosophy on love and the beginning of his career. After being exiled by Pope Boniface because of his beliefs, Dante wrote The Divine Comedy or La Commedia. Dante exposed esteemed members of society and placed important religious leaders in the lowest parts of hell. Also during his exile, he wrote many works that dejected popular ideas of the time, including De Monarchia, criticizing the Pope's power in Italy. Dante's bold and honest writing made him influential to Italy's renaissance and reform. Nearly a hundred years after his death, Dante's ideas fueled many concepts of the Renaissance. Dante inspired important Renaissance writers such as Giovanni Boccacio, Matteo Palmieri, Francesco Petrarca, and Niccolò Machiavelli. As well as visual artists Sandro Boticelli, Domenico Di Michelino, Agnolo Bronzino, Giorgio Vasari, and Michelangelo. His ideas can be seen in Italian Renaissance through literature, art, and religious reform.

Dante led the way in Renaissance literature, his advanced ideas fueled the concepts of Italian Renaissance a century after his death. Multiple writers took from his unique manner of writing. Dante introduced Terza Rima, courtly love, and the Tuscan Vernacular into Italian writing. Giovanni Boccacio admired Dante's work and often imitated his literary style. Boccacio credited Dante for "demonstrating the beauty of Florentine vernacular" (Gilson 28). Some of Dante's popularity is a result of Boccacio's biography of him. After Boccacio wrote Dante's biography, other writers began to admire his work and take inspiration from it. Dante shifted from the use of latin in literature to the language of common people. He did this so that everyone at the time could read and learn from his work. After him, writers such as Boccacio, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), and Matteo Palmieri wrote in the common language. Additionally, Dante introduced Terza Rima into the literary sphere. Terza Rima uses three-line stanzas, in iambs, with alternating lines rhyming. After Dante, this style became widespread in Italian writers. Matteo Palmieri used Terza Rima in his work Citta Di Vita (1465) and also drew from Dante's Divine Comedy. Palmieri wrote Citta Di Vita after a religious experience and describes his ascent through three levels, similar to Dante's Divine Comedy. Petrarch also used Terza Rima in his piece Triofini, written in Tuscan vernacular. Although not the first, Dante forefronted the Courtly Love writing style, highlighting physical desire and spiritual closeness to a woman. Lastly, Niccolò Michiavelli, wrote plays that expressed his personal political views after inspired by Dante's bold expression. Many artists traditionalized Dante's original literary style in the Italian Renaissance.

Apart from literature, Dante also inspired visual artists such as Sandro Boticelli, Domenico Di Michelino, Agnolo Bronzino, Giorgio Vasari, and Michelangelo. Boticelli illustrated the layers of hell as Dante described them in the Inferno. Giorgio Vasari wrote of Boticelli saying, "Since Sandro was also a learned man, he wrote a commentary on part of Dante's poem, and after illustrating the Inferno, he printed the work' (Vasari 214). After reading Dante's work, Boticelli's style shifted from light works such as The Birth of Venus to the condemning style of his Divine Comedy illustrations. Domenico Di Michelino also painted Dante and his description of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven. In the painting, sinners process down the levels of Hell, with Adam and

Eve situated above representing Heaven. Agnolo Bronzino also painted a stylized portrait of Dante and his Divine Comedy after commissioned by Giovanni Cavalcanti. Giorgio Vasari painted the six most influential poets and philosophers, with Dante situated in the center, directing the conversation. The painting shows the great poets of Italy with Dante at their core. Luca Martini commissioned this piece because of his admiration for Dante. Lastly, Michelangelo often took inspiration from Dante for his art and his writing. Michealangelo wrote the poem “Dante” showing his knowledge and admiration for him. Also, in his drawings of the Pietà he inscribed “they devote no thought how much blood it costs” (Paradiso 29: 91-92). These words from The Divine Comedy show Michealangelo’s respect for Dante’s work, so much so that he would put it in his art. Michealangelo also used Dante’s description of Minos, the judge of the souls in Hell, to depict him in The Last Judgement. Michealangelo used Dante’s words, “dreadful..gnashing his teeth/ examining the sins of those who enter/ he judges and assigns as his tail twines” (Inferno 5;4-7). Michelangelo depicted Minos wrapping his tail around sinners to condemn them to the level of hell in which they belong. He, unlike the other artists, used Dante’s work to inspire parts of his art, rather than depicted Dante himself. Many Renaissance artists honored Dante by depicting him in their art, while others used what he wrote as inspiration for their depictions of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

In his literature, Dante expressed his personal views on spirituality and philosophy. Dante believed in the dual nature of man, meaning that man is a body and soul composite, part for earth and part for eternal life. He also began the philosophy of humanism. Humanism states that the human person should do what pleases him, and in that he will please God. This belief emphasizes rational thinking and basic human needs above the irrational beliefs of the time. This philosophy became widespread during the Italian Renaissance and influenced the leaders of the spiritual reformation, such as Boccaccio and Petrarch. Dante also believed that the leaders and of the church should not be the leaders of the government and vise-versa. Dante thought that the secular leaders should focus on the secular world and the religious leaders should focus on the religious world. However, he did not think that the laws of the state should be completely separated from the church. Instead, he supported the laws that uphold moral and religious standards. Dante initially supported the Guelphs who held loyalty to the Papal State, this faction won the dispute and the Pope rose into power. They Guelphs then separated into the white and black groups. The White Guelphs, Dante’s side, were weary of the Pope’s excessive influence. The Pope and radical Black Guelphs exiled Dante and the other White Guelphs. Because of his exile, Dante wrote about his opinions on the Papal tyranny and later his ideas began to spread eventually aiding in the separation of powers.

Dante’s widespread influence inspired many movements of the Italian Renaissance. His innovative ideas on humanism, religion, government and literature spread through important scholars and artists more than a century after his time. Styles such as Terza Rima, Courtly love, and the Tuscan vernacular became popularized among writers of the Renaissance. His depictions of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven were artistically depicted visual artists, often with Dante crediting him for his ideas. As a philosopher, Dante began a movement for the individual which forefronted the beginning of the spiritual reformation.