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Purgatory (Modern Library Classics)



Synopsis

A new translation by Anthony Esolen Illustrations by Gustave Doré © Written in the fourteenth century by Italian poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* is arguably the greatest epic poem of all time—presenting Dante’s brilliant vision of the three realms of Christian afterlife: Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise. In this second and perhaps most imaginative part of his masterwork, Dante struggles up the terraces of Mount Purgatory, still guided by Virgil, in a continuation of his difficult ascent to purity. Anthony Esolen’s acclaimed translation of *Inferno*, Princeton professor James Richardson said, “follows Dante through all his spectacular range, commanding where he is commanding, wrestling, as he does, with the density and darkness in language and in the soul. It is living writing.” This edition of *Purgatory* includes an appendix of key sources and extensive endnotes—an invaluable guide for both general readers and students.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I want to explore what makes for a good edition of a classic work such as this. First, of course, is the value of the translation itself. Dr. Esolen’s is a superior translation to the others readily available, including that by John Ciardi. I have tried numerous times to read Ciardi’s rendering, wanting very much to like it, but in the end I found his rhythm forced and his efforts even at approximate rhyme unsatisfying. Simply put, his lines do not flow. By contrast, Esolen’s lines not only flow, but propel the reader onward through the narrative, which is no small feat given the many places throughout

the rings of Hell and along the ascent of Mount Purgatory where that attention could stall. This would be enough to commend the translation, but there is more that makes this Modern Library a superlative edition. His introduction does an extraordinary job of explaining what Purgatory is and is not. In so doing, he has provided an invaluable aid not only to the non-Catholic reader, but likely to the Catholic reader as well, who may not have the best understanding of this wonderful aspect of life after death. Yes, I say it is wonderful based on Esolen's introduction, but I shall leave the reasons for that until another post. For the moment I will conclude by saying that based on his introduction alone, one could not help but marvel at the love of God, desire that love ever more ardently, and see in the gift of Purgatory one more expression of that love. For such a reasonably priced and slender book, Dr. Esolen manages to include the most helpful appendices and notes. Two appendices contain selections from Aquinas that give insight into Dante's theology. One includes samples of Medieval poetry by poets whom Dante encounters.

Many readers enjoy the *Inferno* but proceed no farther. Late in the *Inferno* (canto xxx), Virgil admonishes Dante to stop watching and enjoying the brawling damned. Rather than fixate on the entertainment of hell, readers also should lift their attention and go with the poets to Purgatory. The *Purgatorio* "is arguably the product of Dante's most brilliant poetic conception," Esolen says, because although "there were visions of Hell before Dante's, however far they fall short of his[, t]here were no visions of Purgatory." Dante captures well the meaning of the doctrine of Purgatory, the efficacy of prayers for the dead, and joyful suffering, portraying them with great understanding, artistry, and depth. Esolen's notes are respectful and explanatory, complementing and complimenting Dante. Purgatory is an easier read than is the *Inferno*, and it should be as we move from the heavy darkness of hell into the light. While Esolen's translation of the *Inferno* would have benefited from a schematic of hell, the ascent of Mount Purgatorio is more easily visualized and needs no such aid. I found *The Dore Illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy* (136 Plates by Gustave Dore) (a few small examples from Dore are in Esolen's volume) a valuable aid in reading the *Inferno*, but the illustrations added less benefit to Purgatory; the black and white illustrations that helped capture the sense of the darkness in hell were even a bit of a handicap when considering the symbolism of the colors in Purgatory.

"My little ship of ingenuity/now hoists her sails to speed through better waters..." Having finished his tour of hell and its residents, Dante Alighieri turns his attention to a more cheerful (if less juicy) supernatural realm. "Purgatory" is less famous than its predecessor, but it's still a beautiful piece of

work that explores the mindset not of the damned, but of sinners who are undergoing a divine cleansing -- beautiful, hopeful and a little sad. Outside of Hell, Dante and Virgil encounter a small boat piloted by an angel and filled with human souls -- and unlike the damned, they're eager to find "the mountain." And as Hell had circles of damnation, Purgatory has terraces that the redeemable souls climb on their way towards Heaven, and none of the people there will leave their terrace until they are cleansed. And the sins that are cleansed here are the seven deadly ones: the proud, the envious, the wrathful, the greedy, the lazy, the gluttonous, and the lustful. But as Dante moves slowly through the terraces, he finds himself gaining a new tour guide as he approaches Heaven...I'll say this openly: the second part of the "Divine Comedy" is simply not as deliciously entertaining as "Inferno" -- it was kind of fun to see Dante skewering the corrupt people of his time, and describing the sort of grotesque punishments they merited. But while not as fun, "Purgatory" is a more transcendent, hopeful kind of story since all the souls there will eventually be cleansed and make their way to Heaven. As a result, "Purgatorio" is filled with a kind of eager anticipation -- there's flowers, stars, dancing, angelic ferrymen, mythic Grecian rivers and an army of souls who are all-too-eager to get to Purgatory so their purification can start.

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