

BIOGRAPHIES
CLASSIC LOVE POEMS BY ITALIAN MASTERS
AND INTRODUCING 2 POEMS BY DONNA MEIDT'S ITALIAN GRANDFATHER

1. GUIDO CAVALCANTI 1260 – 1300

Guido Cavalcanti was one of Dante's closest friends, the Florentine leader of the "dolce stil nuovo", the school of poetry founded in Bologna in the 13th century. The poets of this style dedicated themselves to the exaltation and glorification of woman. Its philosophical emphasis was based on the belief that love can be born only in "gentle hearts".

2. DANTE ALIGHIERI 1265 – 1321

In a page of his Comedy (the adjective "divine" was added later by Boccaccio), Dante gave this definition of himself: "I am one who takes note when inspired by love, and in the very way that it dictates within me, so I go shedding meaning". Dante was nine years old when he first saw Beatrice Portinari. From that moment, he wrote "love ruled my soul". Beatrice was to marry a wealthy banker and Dante went on to marry Gemma Donati. Nevertheless, it was his platonic love for Beatrice – "the woman of my mind" as he described her, which was to be the inspiration of his life and work.

3. FRANCESCO PETRARCA 1304 – 1374

The span of scarcely more than one generation separates Dante and Petrarch. Yet, between the Divine Comedy and the Canzoniere, there is a profound difference of tone and sensitivity; the two masterpieces seem to belong to epochs far distant one from the other. One might say that the Middle Ages, with their essentially mystical and ethical conception of life based on the dogmas of Christian faith, ended with Dante, and that with Petrarch a new era opened – distinctive for its love of nature and earthly pleasures, its quest for happiness in this world, its doubts and contradictions.

4. GIOVANNI BOCCACCIO 1313 – 1375

Boccaccio was a life-long admirer of Dante and Petrarca. Unlike his predecessors, he excelled in narrative prose rather than poetry and his lyric production, however rich in quantity, remains of secondary importance. His masterpiece is the Decameron, a collection of one hundred short stories, from which the next poem is derived.

5. LORENZO DE' MEDICI 1449 – 1492

Statesman, poet, philosopher, art patron, Lorenzo De' Medici ranks among the outstanding personalities of the Italian Renaissance. Popularly referred to as "Il Magnifico" - the Magnificent – he became the ruler of Florence at the age of 20, remained in power for 23 years until his death and brought his native city to a peak of unequalled splendor. Critics and historians have found it difficult to define Lorenzo's character and true nature. Machiavelli concluded that "if one examines the light and serious side of his life, one sees in him two different persons joined with an almost impossible conjunction".

6. ANGELO POLIZIANO 1454 – 1494

No writer expressed better than Poliziano the ideals of the artists and of the brilliant society of men and women who during the 15th century gathered in such Renaissance centers as Venice and Florence, Rome and Naples, Milan and Ferrara, Mantua and Urbino. These ideals culminated in a refined Epicurean vision of a life devoted to learning, aesthetic enjoyment and love. Elegance, grace, fantasy, erudition were the qualities most praised and sought after: they were blended to perfection in the verses of Poliziano.

7. FRANCESCO BERNI 1497 – 1535

Berni's sharp wit and gift for caricature gave birth to a new genre of burlesque and satiric poetry, still called "Bernesque". Berni's unique gift for poking fun at his contemporaries, including those in high places, such as Popes Hadrian VI and Clement VII, inevitably brought him powerful enemies. His life ended tragically: he was poisoned in his 38th year.

8. GIAMBATTISTA MARINO 1569 – 1625

The 17th century is regarded in Italian literature as a period of decadence. The poet's aim is no longer to teach, to enlighten or simply to please the reader, it is, in Marino's own formulation, to produce surprise, the marvelous. Our selection describes the poet's passion for a black servant. Marino was celebrated as the greatest Italian poet of his time.

9. GIACOMO LEOPARDI 1798- 1837

Giacomo Leopardi, one of the greatest Italian poets of all times, was a nobleman, his father was a count, his mother a marchioness, both rigid, narrow-minded aristocrats. Devoured by an insatiable craving for learning, Giacomo mastered Hebrew, Latin, Greek and modern languages, translated many classics, wrote several philological works and a history of astronomy. By the time he was 19 he had amassed an amazing store of knowledge, but had also compromised his health: he began suffering from nervous disorders, his eyesight weakened and he became a hunchback. Aware that he had allowed his youth to pass and that being so frail and unattractive he would probably never be loved by a woman, he felt it would require great courage "to love a virtuous man whose only beauty is the soul". These pessimistic thoughts permeate all his works.

10. ANTONIO PISANO 1894 – 1979

Antonio Pisano was born in Gasperina, Catanzaro, Calabria . In 1910, at the age of sixteen, he left his homeland for America where he lived the rest of his life. Antonio was a poet and a playwright. His poems were published over his lifetime in two Italian American magazines: *Il Divigando* and *La Follia*. He founded a theater troupe in Philadelphia, active from about 1920 until 1935. On October 19, 2010 three of his poems: *Fanciuletta Assuntina*, *Stornelli Sinceri*, and *Sonettu cu a cuda* were presented by the Italian Consulate in Philadelphia as the world premiere of his works put to opera music by Gianmaria Griglio, the musical director of the International Opera Theater.

11. ALDA MERINI 1931 - 2009

Alda Merini was a renowned Italian writer and poet, born in Milan and died there aged 78. Her first book of poems dates back to 1953. Others followed, until 1961. Following two decades marked by sickness and mental institutions, she resumed her poetical activity. What renders Merini's work so compelling is that despite her struggle with a mental illness and her proclivity to write about death, she still finds glimmers of hope, which is apparent in several of her poems. She once said: "They ask me often what the asylum is like, but no one asks me about what it's like to be alive. Life is part of the asylum because it's in this unholy and abject place that I found life".