

# Dante's allegory of love in the divine comedy assignment

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The Meaning of Love through the works of Dante Lighter Devon Strand-Brown " O all ye whose intellects are sound, Look now and see the meaning that is hidden Beneath the veil that covers my strange verses:" (Inferno 9: 61) Dante Lighter is indisputably the most famous Italian poet in history. His seminal work, The Divine Comedy still inspires 700 years after its writing, and has not yet yielded all of its secrets, though it is one of the most widely studied works ever to be written. The name " Dante" and that of The Divine Comedy are known the world over, but what of the man Dante? What of the allegory beneath his verses?

The history of the Divine Poet, his life, his love and the mysteries of his great achievements are known to relatively few, compared to the number of people who have read the Comedy. My purpose here to open those doors to you, to give a taste of the lessons and mysteries of Dent's work, to give a glimpse of a man, famous in his time and forevermore, and to recount the greatest tale of Love ever told. His definition of love may be the most potent and intricate definition ever described, told through four separate levels of allegory, culminating in the rise of the universal goal of Love itself.

The Man " In that book which is my memory, On the first page of the chapter that is the day when I first met you, Appear the words, ' Here begins a new life'. " (Volta) Dante was born in 1265, though the month is not known. His given name was Du- ranted Delhi Lighter, Dante being a shortened version which he himself, and subsequent -?? 2-?? writers and translators would adopt. His family name Lighter comes form the Latin word ' aligner', which can be translated to " winged. " Though it came from his father, it was

originally passed from a mother, Algeria Loudhailer -?? wife of Guidance Elise', founder of Florence -?? to her son.

Thus Dante can trace his lineage directly back to he founders of his beloved Florence. The root meaning of Durance (and Dante) is more obvious, enduring, as names were of the most importance in those days. Dante would be happy to know that he has far surpassed the destiny of an enduring name. His father was a man of finance, buying and selling property as well as lending money, something Dante later disapproved of and which found its way into his Inferno. His mother was also from a well respected Florentine family, the Bait. Her father Durance (whom Dante was named after) was a Judge at the time.

Much of the Poet's history we can find in the Comedy because although it is the story of his enlightenment, it also tells the tale of his past. We see this with his mother, whom we find in the circle of violence in Inferno, for she committed suicide while Dante was still very young, somewhere between 1270 and 1275. After his mother's death, his father soon remarried and had two more children. It seems Dante had a good relationship with these siblings as he refers affectionately to a sister who visits him while he is sick in " La Vita Nova. These references require that I move ahead, to describe the works of Dante for it is especially through them that we learn so much of the man. I shall discuss The Divine Comedy at greater length in a future section. But as an overview it is the tale of Dent's Journey through Inferno, rising up through Purgatory, then finally moving through Paradise, guided -?? 3-?? by his beloved Beatrice, with his pilgrimage ending with the vision of

God. The other work that I shall mention often is "la Vita Nova", The New Life, which is a compilation of poems, sonnets and stories from throughout his life.

It particularly focuses on his love for Beatrice which pervaded his life from the age of nine until he died at fifty-six. At this time Florence was a burgeoning hub of trade and culture, becoming one of the richest and most powerful cities in Italy, and even in Eastern Europe. However the city was divided along many lines; there was a split between the populace and the gentry, yet also among the gentry. The largest of these rifts was that between the Gullah, whom Dante supported, and the Gibberellins.

Once the Gibberellins were expelled from Florence another divide occurred; Between the Black Gullets, those who supported the Papacy, and the white Gullets, who wished for more autonomy from Rome. With the support of Pope Boniface the Black Gullets took control of Florence, destroying many White Gullah homes and exiling Dante. If he were ever to return to his beloved Florence to "worship at his baptismal fount" he would suffer death by burning. Following his exile, Dante wandered from city to city. Reigniting his intellectual spirit in Bologna and moving as far field as Paris.

Finally he settled in Raven, a small city not far from Florence. It is during this time that it is believed that he began his masterpiece, The Divine Comedy. It was completed just prior to his death, sometime between 1318 and 1321. The final Canto of Paradise was said to be lost for months following Dante's death, until in a dream, one of Dante's sons saw his father who showed him where the final pages were hidden. His son, Pitter, searched for the pages

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and found them just where -?? 4-?? his father had indicated, and so, just as a dream had begun the Comedy, a dream completed it.

The Divine Comedy tells the tale of the Poet, Dante, and his Journey down into Inferno, up Mount Purgatory and into Paradise where "the Love that moved the sun and the other stars" is finally revealed to him. It is divided into three canticles, Inferno, Purgatorial and Paradise. Each canticle is then further divided into 33 cantos, similar to chapters, except for Inferno which has a single introductory canto bringing the total to 100. Each canto is further split into three line sections, each line with a precise 11 syllables.

This story fictively occurs in the year 1300 and Dante is faithful to this date, only including people who had died before 1300 in any level of the Comedy, though often referencing those who are still living. Inferno, the first volume, is by far the most famous and widely read of the three. It begins: "Midway upon the Journey of our life." Simply this first line gives premise to the Comedy being both a literal Journey through the levels of the earth but also a curative voyage through the life of a person, in this case Dante, though it can be expanded to include a more universal version of life.

Through Inferno Dante is guided by another great poet, Virgil, who, because he is a virtuous infidel has been confined to neutrality, the first level of Hell. But who has been tasked by Beatrice to guide Dante down through Hell and up Mount Purgatory. Their Journey through Hell takes them down through all nine levels, on each level pausing to watch the punishment of the shades and sometimes speak to them, talking of their crimes or of the goings on of the living world. Finally in the lowest -?? 5-?? level -?? Judea, reserved for

the traitors-?? gravity reverses and they climb back out of the pit of inferno to once more observe the stars.

At the base of Mount Purgatory seven Ps are inscribed on Dante's forehead. Each standing for Peccate or sin in Latin. As they pass through each of the seven levels of purgatory, each P is purged from his forehead. For Purgatory is not a place of perpetuity as many believe; it is a place of purging sins as its name suggests. Virgil continues as his guide and offers advice and answers to his questions along the way. However on questions of faith he defers to Beatrice, asking Dante to await her for his answer. At the peak of Purgatory is the Garden of Eden, earthly paradise.

Here in paradise Dante is in awe of the heavens above him, while Virgil is reserved and distant. Dante turns away from his guide to gaze at four bright stars above him and when he looks back Virgil is gone. In his place stands Beatrice. From the Gardens of Eden Beatrice leads Dante into Paradise, the nine circles of heaven. In each of these circles Dante speaks with different figures, Roman Emperors, Saints and Apostles prominent among them. And just as Virgil taught Dante of life and the plight of souls in Inferno and Purgatory, so Beatrice teaches him of divinity, irate and all the levels of beatitude.

One of the people he meets is his great great grand-father Guido, who tasks him to compose a poem which " puts aside all falsehood. " He agrees, and is also tested by the apostles Peter, James and John before he can enter the Empyrean, the highest level of Heaven. It is here in the amphitheater of the Empyrean that Dante's Journey reaches its culmination with his rapturous

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vision of God. -?? 6\_ “ But my own wings were not enough for this, Had it not been that then my mind there smote A flash of lightning, wherein came its wish. (Paradise 33: 139) Dante and Love But now was turning my desire and will, Even as a wheel that equally moved, The Love that moves the sun and the other stars. ” (Paradise 33: 142) Perhaps it is a sad testament to the human race, that the greatest love stories are those of unrequited love. Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Romeo and Juliet, Dante and his Beatrice. Dante first glimpsed Beatrice at the age of nine. Of that sight he says, “ At that moment, I say most truly that the spirit of life, hath its dwelling in the secretes chamber of the heart” (Nova).

He goes on, describing her as a deity, as something other than a worldly woman. From that moment onward his life was drastically changed. “ I say that, from that time forward, Love quite governed my soul” (Nova). His love was torrential, yet when he saw her he kept it in check. For nine years after that first sight they never spoke. He would watch her in her family's small church of Santa Margarita, sitting some ten feet behind her, imagining her as an image of perfection, but never speaking. It is difficult to imagine such love with so little contact.

He was enamored with her but also with his imagination of her. It was not until nine years later to the day, that a word was exchanged between hem. While passing in the street, Beatrice “ by her unspeakable courtesy’ greeted him. He -?? 7-?? remembers she was dressed all in white, unlike the red he first saw her in, white being the color of virginity and divinity. In each of his earthly visions of her, she is described using images and words normally

reserved for Christ or God himself. Dante was taken by the sound of her voice: "For she doth make my veins and pulses tremble. He went directly home and fell asleep and dreamed that Love came to him. Throughout the Vita Nova, Love comes to Dante, taking a different human form each time, and speaks to him, offering advice and admonitions. Love appears to him multiple times and each time represents a shift in Dante's interactions with Beatrice. Dante makes the mistakes of many lovers as he is so overcome by Beatrice. In an attempt to hide the true object of his love, he begins to use what he calls a "screen-lady," a woman toward whom he outwardly directs his attentions so as to divert attention from Beatrice.

This obviously backfires and Beatrice, as they pass again in the street, withholds her greeting. Dante is grief-stricken and, following another vision of love decides to write directly to her. These poems and sonnets received praise in Florence, and were read around the city in small poetry readings, increasing Dante's stature as a great writer even in his time. However life for Dante soon takes another enormous turn, with the death of Beatrice. She is said to have died in June, 1290, a date with "the perfect number nine" having been completed "nine times" according to the Syrian Calendar. (Lewis).

Dante is so overcome that he cannot put words to the event. After compiling the Vita Nova he resolves not to write of Beatrice again, until he can "say of her what was never said of any other woman." It is from this wish that springs the greatest tribute to human love ever created, La Comedia. In Dante's Journey Beatrice is his primary guide. Though Virgil guides him



through two levels of the afterlife, it is Beatrice who sent Virgil to assist Dante and Beatrice whom he follows through paradise and Beatrice who teaches him the most of love. She acts as a personal representation of Christ.

We can see this in many aspects of Dante's description of her -?? her appearance, the events around her and her relation to the number nine. The number nine can be seen as a reference to the divinity of the holy trinity, and it is used in reference to Beatrice to reinforce her power as Dante's connection to the divine. In the ninth canto of both *Inferno* and *Purgatory* Dante enters the city of Dis and then the Gates of Purgatory -?? the two most significant entrances in their respective canticles. Yet in *Paradise*, in the ninth canto, Dante passes from the circles of Venus unto the level of the sun.

This may seem insignificant yet it signifies the passage from earth to heaven. It is not until the level of the sun that all earthly woes and pains are stripped away. This ninth canto is significant as it also demonstrates the divinity of the number, yet interestingly it also illustrates the divinity of love as it is in this canto that Dante meets three great lovers; a mistress, a bishop and a harlot. Not exactly the lovers you would expect, but these references, as well as their relations to nine and their positions in paradise, serve to highlight the significance of human love in order to ascend further into heaven.

This is Beatrice's role, as she serves both as the object of human love and the transcendent divine guide. Other parallels between Beatrice and Christ can

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also be drawn-?? one being her -?? 9-?? appearance in heaven, she is proceeded by Giovanni Primeval, as Christ was similarly proceeded by John the Baptist. Here we can see Dent's literary playfulness with "Giovanni" as a feminine version of John and Primeval as an anagram meaning "Prima Vera" which literally translates to "will come first." Beatrice also descends to Inferno to summon Virgil as Christ did to bring salvation to humanity, Virgil will be Dent's personal salvation.

Dante even recognizes this in Paradise 30: 80 saying "Who deigned for my salvation to leave your footprints in Hell." Lansing also points out a parallel between the names of Christ and Beatrice: The reference to her nickname, "Vice," in Paradise is a way which must evoke the abbreviations of Christ in manuscripts: "Be" (beat, "blessed") and "ice" (ICC= less Crisis= Jesus Christ.)" Despite her obvious divinity, Beatrice is also a physical woman, as we see in the Volta Nova, who inspires love and desire in Dante.

Thus she fills both roles, as the method of divine salvation and also as the guide to human love. Both of which together create natural love, something I will go into greater detail about at a later point. Dante strives, however, to remove any sexual attraction to Beatrice both for the deader and for himself. And for the most part he is successful. By removing her erotic nature in his writing, he reclaims some power from her. As we see in the Vita Nova, she holds great power over him; she has the power to send him into fits of worry or anguish, simply with a laugh or refused look.

In De-redirecting her, we see Dent's attempt to retain his own power over human love, while relinquishing his power over natural love, allow-?? 10 -??

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inning her to guide and teach him of its natural flow. As both the Comedy and the Nova are little more than an homage to Beatrice, it is interesting to see that Dante toeholds this one form of power from her, that of sexual power. It could very well be that he is attempting to protect either himself or Beatrice from the sin of lust, yet we also find a seductress and a harlot in heaven, who further inform Dante on love.

It may also be the case that Dante is protecting himself from the worldly effects of Beatrice. The vast majority of his writings about her are of his perception, his fantasy of her. Their physical contact was negligible and by removing the sexual discourse between them, the Beatrice of Dent's pages is fully from inside the Poet. The Beatrice we know is Dent's fantasy, a character within his own character. It is her spirit, not her body, that guides Dante. Dante may also shrug off this worldly influence because he has a further lord, one to whom he answers whole-heartedly, and for whom Beatrice is the perfect guide.

That lord speaks to him in the third chapter of the Vita Nova saying " I am your lord. " That lord is Love. Allegory The term allegory literally means the " hidden meaning", it derives from Greek " al- SIS" (other) and " Georgia" (speaking), " other speaking. " The Divine Comedy is rife with it. Each canto is filled with political moral and divine statements. Allegory takes four forms in The Divine Comedy modeled after biblical exegesis (interpretation of biblical style); Literal (historical), Allegorical (Typographical) , Moral and Angelical. These four forms follow the interpretation of scripture in the Middle Ages.

In scripture, the historical meaning is -?? 11 what is described as fact. It encompasses the people, places and events represented and shows them historically as things that have occurred. The second meaning (the Allegorical/ Typographical) is that of personification and representation, a person may represent a sin or a virtue. The moral meaning in the scripture is literally represented by Christ. " So far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. " (Aquinas).

The final meaning, the angelical is the hardest to pin down. This is because it is the broadest of the terms; it is the meaning which expands outwards and offers what the writer or reader considers an " eternal" meaning. The angelical represents the realm of the Gods, thus making it eternal, " But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the angelical sense. " (Aquinas) Neither the bible nor The Divine Comedy possess all four of these elements at all times however. Writing is often adorned with " historical buttresses and adornments", events that hold no further meaning than the literal.

Different verses and cantos hold some of these meanings, some are personified in particular figures, others can only be found by evaluating the entire trajectory of the Comedy. These four meanings overlap, come and go, are sometimes clearly visible and some are lost forever in the annals of time. Other than the historical, the allegorical (typological) is the most prevalent form of meaning throughout the Comedy. Because all allegory is dependent on interpretation, the meanings put forth here are those that I deem to be

correct, although there are likely other interpretations or even contrary views.

As Dante followed many of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, the following is the most prevalent definition for the typographical (allegorical) meaning in -?? 12 -?? the Comedy: "Whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also signification" (Aquinas). This is the definition Dante would have followed in instructing his own allegory. Dante borrows heavily from Thomas Aquinas and Aquinas' Theological for his moral theory and view of God, theology and use of allegory.

As far as the view of God, Thomas Aquinas believed that there are two apices of any object or subject (their existence and their essence), except for God. Aquinas preaches God as simplicity. God is simply essence, for his/her/its existence is its essence. This essence to Dante is Love; all other objects are not independent of love and thus God, who is the representation of pure love, is the only individual being in existence. "God is identical to just one indivisible thing, but that one thing has different effects and appearances" (Stump).

Dante also enumerates the importance of each level of meaning, saying in his work Conviction, "I shall always first discourse upon the literal meaning of each canonized, and after that I shall discourse upon its allegory, that is, the hidden truth; and I shall sometimes incidentally touch upon the other senses (angelical), as the place and the time make appropriate." This leads us to believe that the historical (literal) meaning is the most important,

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followed by the allegorical. The angelical seems to be a natural uprising of this discourse of both the literal and the allegorical.

The moral finds its way into the literal meanings as well, since Christ is synonymous with morality, and the bible and Beatrice are taken as fact. Throughout the Comedy, Beatrice and her compatriots teach Dante many -?? 13 -?? things, most of these may be interpreted as the moral allegory. What must also be understood is that the literal meaning will always be present, and for the most part the allegorical will be also. But that Allegory will take one or more of its three forms, typographical/allegorical, moral or angelical. He gives an example of this four-fold allegory in a letter sent to Gangrened of Verona.

The Allegory of Love “ Love, which pardons no beloved from loving, took me so strongly with delight in him That, as you see, it still abandons me not... ” (Nova) As we begin to look at the many meanings of love in The Divine Comedy, the three literal forms we shall examine are 1) love as an emotion, 2) love as Beatrice, and 3) Love as a figure and as God. First let us examine Dent's belief of love. For Dante, love was the driving force of the universe. It causes souls to rise to heaven or fall into hell. It literally set the stars in motion. All sinners and all saints had their actions based in love, for better or for worse.

Love causes all movement in the universe, whether for the sinners to ascend because of love for God or for the blessed to descend in order to save a soul. Just as Beatrice descends to bring Dante to the Empyrean, it also causes the angels to move in their circles around God, thus creating the movement of

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the heavens. However, love also has a darker side. According to Dante, love is also the root of sin. He takes this view from William Perusals' analysis of the Sustaining Sins; Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Lust. These sins can be divided into three categories according to love; insufficient, disordered and excessive.

Insufficient love takes the form of sloth, disordered love manifests in pride, envy and wrath (as these three are misguidedly directed at an external object), and love in excess creates avarice, gluttony and lust. These are all forms of what Virgil distinguishes for Dante as rational love, separate from natural love which I shall discuss at greater length later. Rational love takes many forms, both positive and negative. If unbalanced or perverted, it is the basis of all sin, but it is also that which leads Dante towards natural love. Dante's earthly love for Beatrice could be described as courtly love, a popular subject of the times. Courtly love can be defined as "desire and longing for someone, and personal suffering by loving this person" (Du France). This definition as we can see applies perfectly to Dante's relations to Beatrice. It is this earthly relationship that begins Dante on his path to salvation and enlightenment, thus it is this form of rational love that sets Dante on his path. At the beginning of *The Divine Comedy*, the Pilgrim believes this love for Beatrice is pure and correct. Yet through his discussions with Francesca De Rimini, and then Virgil's discourse on love in purgatory, Dante begins to doubt his assertion.

Finally upon his meeting with Beatrice in Paradise he repents for the earthly love he paid her and accepts the purity of natural love, the love that will

guide him through paradise unto the Empyrean. Natural love was considered by Dante to be the love of and for God. It is the pure force which motivates the universe and binds it together. It is the purest form of this love that Dante is striving for throughout the Comedy. Through hell and purgatory, he is strip-?? 15-?? inning away the sins and tarnishing of sin, and in paradise he is being prepared, level by level, by Beatrice, for the experience of Pure Love.

Virgil, who has not entered heaven and has thus not experienced natural love, can only describe to Dante human love and the perverted shapes it takes in sin. The constant motion of natural love is moving toward a goal; that goal is the attainment of the realization of place and of perfection for every object and creature in the world. "As the specific capacity of anything is actualities by being exercised, the nature of that thing is progressively completed or perfected, according to Aquinas" (Stump). It is by loving and being love that this process is perpetuated and thus moves closer and closer to a perfect equilibrium.

This ultimate beatitude is inconceivable to the human mind, however, and thus we give it a humanly understandable form, that of God. Yet Dante is very careful not to name God as the center of the Empyrean; the highest level of heaven is occupied by Love. Virgil describes how love takes three stages to develop. The process begins with awareness of another object or person. This perception is offered to the soul to Judge whether this object is beautiful and shall bring happiness. If it is deemed good, then eve develops and takes the form of an inclination or attraction toward that object.



Until love develops, the force driving this process is human will and it is thus that love can be misguided, as the will can make mistakes and lead an individual toward sin. If we take love as the attractive force that moves the universe, then the ultimate goal of life is also love, but love in equilibrium. This is why perverted, insufficient and excessive love are sins, for it is balanced love, natural love that we are striving toward. We cannot, however, achieve union with natural love simply by following others'