

Dante: love and goodness as guidance to self- improvement



“ Love is the seed in you of every virtue and of all acts deserving punishment.” —Purg. XVII, 104-5 Dante calls his great work a comedy, not for its humor but because it meets the traditional definition of a comedy: a story with a rising plot from sad to happy. In this sense, Dante’s beginning in Hell and ending in Heaven can be read as a comedy in the literary sense. Because comedy has long been regarded as a style lower than tragedy, Dante’s decision to call his work a comedy may have been one of modesty – he didn’t want to suggest he was in the company of Virgil, Ovid, and other great tragedians. After all, pride is the first sin in the purgatory Dante describes. This work embodies the concept of comedy on a deeper level, though, as it depicts self-improvement and ascension to God’s ideal realm under the guidance of love and goodness. In the beginning of *Inferno*, Dante has already suggested the purpose of the journey: “ When I had journeyed half of our life’s way, I found myself within a shadowed forest, for I had lost the path that does not stray.” His reference to “ our life” shows everyone undertakes such a journey in order to understand one’s sins and improve oneself. Starting from “ a shadowed forest,” or a lack of faith in God, Dante will face not just the three beasts, but rather a spiritual challenge of self-purgation which permeates the whole work. After Dante goes through all nine circles of *Inferno* and reaches the island Mountain of Purgatory, he is asked by Cato to “ wash away all of Hell’s stains” (Purg. I, 96), indicating he has overcome these sins and ascended to a higher level—purgatory “ in which the human soul is cleansed of sin, becoming worthy of ascent to Heaven” (I, 5-6). When Dante rebukes the prideful in the First Terrace in purgatory, he implies our life resembles the metamorphosis of a butterfly that mortal humans are “ worms and born to form the angelic butterfly that

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soars”, experiencing a process from “ the imperfect grub” to “ its final form” (X, 125-9). That the angel erases the first of the seven P’s (Peccatum) in Dante’s forehead when he comes into the Second Terrace also exemplifies that he has transcended Pride and ready to further improve himself. Dante’s ascendant journey is guided by Virgil in the Inferno and Purgatorio, and Beatrice in the Paradiso. Why Dante chooses Virgil and Beatrice as his guide is because they are people who he admires and loves. Virgil is often described as “ knowledgeable” and Beatrice, as “ benevolent,” implying they are respectively the symbol of intelligence and love, both leading Dante to the ideal realm of Love and Goodness. The Divine Comedy can be interpreted as Dante’s attempt to transcend his earthly love with Beatrice into a spiritual or Divine Love. Dante thinks “ there’s no Creator and no creature who ever was without love—natural or mental” (Purg. XVII, 91-2). The difference between righteous and sinful deeds is the direction and the degree of love as the quote in the beginning shows. The idea of love as an innate property coincided with the Platonic love which is the desire of the soul to reach its final stage. This aspect of love is not only involved in Virgil’s verbal interpretation, but also in Dante’s journey. When Virgil cleans Dante’s tear-stained cheeks, Virgil “ totally revealed the color that Inferno had concealed” (Purg. I, 128-9). The great sins in Inferno can only conceal the original color, or love, which always accompanies one’s soul. As E. M. Forster wrote, “ You can transmute love, muddle it, ignore it... but you can never pull it out of you...” - though Forster here refers to another meaning of love. But this sense of ascending toward perfection guided by Love is somewhat not applicable in the Inferno. Rather than ascending, Dante is literally descending in the Inferno. To look at the universe of Dante, we will find, <https://assignbuster.com/dante-love-and-goodness-as-guidance-to-self-improvement/>

geographically, Lucifer is actually closer to the Heaven than the world in the northern hemisphere and any other circle in the Inferno. Does everyone have to go through Judecca in order to reach the Heaven? Does Dante want to separate the Hell filled with immense sins from the overall process of progression? Or does Dante bitterly satirize the human fault and the filthy nature of those who lack of faith in God? I would argue that the answer is none of the above. The Divine Comedy is a consistent work unified by not only Love but also Goodness. During Dante's journey in the Inferno, he witnesses a hierarchical world of crime and punishment. Dante's hatred of evil results in his devotion to righteousness, or the Goodness. Therefore, the Inferno calls for the Goodness of one's spiritual world through the impersonal objectivity of divine justice. Minos' curling of his tail to decide which level the damned soul should go to (Canto V), and Dante's putting his own teacher, Brunetto, among the Sodomites (Canto XV) both prove the impartial judgment, stressing the immitigable, emotionless objectivity of morality and divine justice. This impartiality implies that no matter the degree of sin, as long as one commits crimes, one is assigned proper punishment immediately. The more fear and awe the Inferno generates on one's mind, the more likely one goes on pursuing the Goodness, overcoming sins in one's life and finding salvation in God. Therefore, it is indeed another way for self-improvement. For instance, Dante replied his teacher Ser Brunetto that " so long as I am not rebuked by conscience, I stand prepared for Fortune, come what may" (Inf. XV, 92-3). He regards one's conscience as one of the most important rules to follow, regardless of which party one belongs. In addition, there is also a sense of development in the Inferno. Dante suggests the Second Circle for the lustful is " where Dido suffers" (Inf. V, 85), instead of <https://assignbuster.com/dante-love-and-goodness-as-guidance-to-self-improvement/>

the Seventh Circle for Suicides. However, near the end of Inferno, Dante promises Fra Alberigo to take off the hard veils from his face by swearing “ if I don’t free you, may I go to the bottom of the ice” (XXXIII, 116-7). After he learns the crime Alberigo has committed, however, he changes his mind, asserting “ it was courtesy to show him rudeness” (XXXIII, 150). It indicates Dante’s overall development in the poem, represented by the extent to which he learns not to pity suffering sinners and to despise sin wholeheartedly. Dante also concludes his Inferno optimistically with an image of stars, showing that Dante has begun his slow climb out of sin and confusion and has taken a closer step toward Beatrice and God. The Inferno calls for the Goodness of one’s spiritual world. Accordingly, the Purgatorio calls for the Love, and the Paradiso is an ideal world of a combination of Love and Goodness. In Purgatorio, the criterion set to classify different sins is love —perverted love, insufficient love and excessive love of earthly goods. In Paradiso, Beatrice is not only the guide of Love, but also reflects the Eternal Light. It is interesting to look at what the last thing Beatrice did before she left Dante, and the last thing Dante saw before setting his eye upon the Eternal Light. It is a smile! Before Beatrice turns back to the eternal fountain, “ she, however far away she seemed, smiled, and she looked at me” (Para. XXXI, 91-2). Also, when Dante is near the God, “ Bernard was signaling—he smiled—to me to turn my eyes on high” (Para. XXXIII, 49-50). It is Beatrice’s smile that in Dante’s youth has made him touch the new heights of passion. It is the same smile that concludes Dante’s journey when he completes his self-purgation and finally abandons the earthly love and reaches the Divine Love. Smile here becomes an approval signal of Dante’s achievement toward the Love and Goodness, and implies why the poem is called a comedy. If <https://assignbuster.com/dante-love-and-goodness-as-guidance-to-self-improvement/>

Dante wrote the whole poem just as “ a bitterly sarcastic and serious condemnation of the human condition,” then he is risking being sent to the Eighth Circle for the Fraud that he himself depicts. He clearly knows that he doesn’t travel through the Inferno, Purgatory and Paradise, nor does he know whether they actually exist or not. I would rather believe the Divine Comedy embodies the spiritual framework of the poet and his imagination of a way leading to resurrection. Dante incorporates the infinite time into the finite space with the perpetual pursuit of Love and Goodness. In the context of Medieval Italy, his unique form of the Divine Comedy created a well-ordered world of spiritual beings and a new way to search for resurrection of the soul.