



Dante's Journey to Find Balance Within Duality in *The Divine Comedy*

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Introduction

Dante Alighieri's, *The Divine Comedy*, is widely regarded as one of the most influential pieces of poetry in World Literature. The trilogy established the importance of changing and expanding language to fit evolving themes and character development. As the events of the trilogy play out, Dante finds himself facing more difficult challenges and decisions, and the way in which these events are introduced and dealt with define yet another unique feature of Dante's work that shapes much of the future of writing itself. Perhaps the most crucial manner of dealing with challenges in the trilogy is the way in which Alighieri chose to present them. He writes from the point of view of himself, the poet, describing a pilgrim who goes by the same name experiencing a journey indicative of the one he, himself, went through: the main difference being that, while Alighieri faced a metaphorical journey, Dante the pilgrim faces a literal journey from the depths of Hell to Purgatory to Paradise. This dual version of Dante, himself, is only the first of many dualities presented in the trilogy.

Thesis

The well-documented duality of Dante as both poet and protagonist throughout *The Divine Comedy* serves as the basis for other dualities throughout the poem, specifically those of intellect and emotion and love and sin, which, in summation, help to explain the significance of maintaining balance among dualities and how maintaining this balance allows one to both recognize their status as an Earthly human and understand the importance of using their time on Earth to live and love purely and repent.

Dante as Poet and Pilgrim

Dante Alighieri, the poet, tells the story of Dante the pilgrim's journey from Earthly Hell to actual Hell to Purgatory to Paradise. By telling the story of something that occurred in the past to a fictional version of himself that may somewhat relate to the metaphorical journey he himself took to rediscover his own faith, Dante the poet "...made/forged the magic of his compelling realism" (Barolini 4). This shows that the physical journey the pilgrim takes can, in many ways, relate to the emotional journey the poet took to rediscover his respective relationship with God. In this way, Dante the poet, the pilgrim, and the reader are "engaged on a journey," which offers Dante, above all else, the opportunity to "contemplate self in the inexplicability of self" as he navigates the connection between these two sides of himself (Took 402). "This dualism, like that between the pilgrim Dante and his guides, is an inescapable stage, and usually insurmountable obstacle, in the progress toward understanding" (Moevs 3). To view the pilgrim and poet as two separate entities risks implying that the poet has not already taken a journey similar to the one he is writing for his pilgrim self. There can be no separation of the sides of Dante because neither side nor the reader would be able to truly understand the purpose behind the journey and how every aspect is done and written intentionally. Dante the pilgrim begins his journey lost and scared, both physically in the woods and metaphorically in his mind as he struggles to understand his relationship with God. He is an extremely emotional man who worries about the uncertainty of his future. This uncertainty of the future is the one aspect of the pilgrim that the poet does not possess as he writes. The poet's metaphorical journey has concluded in the sense that he is aware of what one needs to do in order to reevaluate their connection to faith and God, while the pilgrim is only beginning that journey and is quite afraid to do so. Thus, the poet has the advantage of being able to present the pilgrim's journey as he learns, through struggle and strife, the lessons the poet has already learned in his own journey. The pilgrim will learn and grow as a person of faith, perhaps in the manner the poet would have liked to, while the poet documents the entire journey from a place of knowing and understanding.

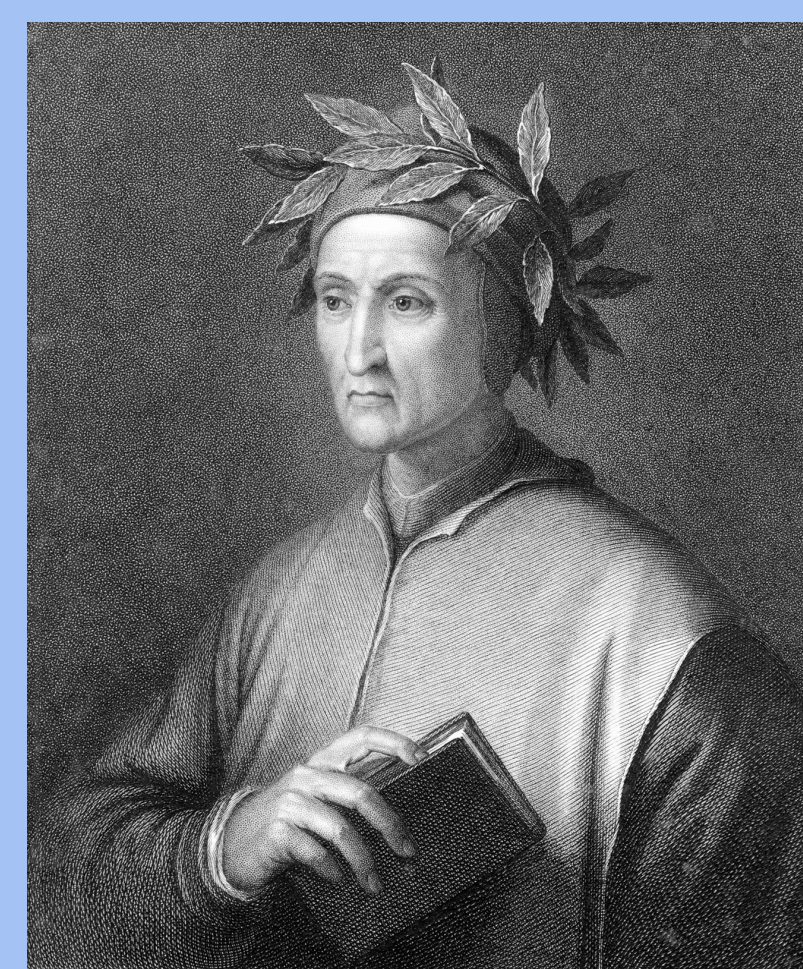


Figure 1: Dante Alighieri: the poet
Photo Credit: Britannica.com

Duality of Intellect and Emotion

In *Inferno*, Dante has a tendency to react to the horrors he sees with emotion rather than reason or intellect. Upon meeting the lovers, Paolo and Francesca, forever punished in the Circle of Lust to never touch one another, Dante is presented with a sin that is directly related to love and the duality between love and sin. He is aware that succumbing to lust, especially when it involves adultery, is a sin but still feels sympathy for Paolo and Francesca. He is unable to think rationally about the nature of their sin. It is this instinctual emotional nature of Dante the pilgrim that initially prevents him from being awake enough, both physical and mentally, to understand the purpose of the journey ahead of him. As he continues his journey through Hell, Dante determines that he can condemn the sin but not the sinner, a decision he continues believing until he reaches the Circle containing corrupt politicians who committed political violence. It is in this Circle that the pilgrim feels no sympathy whatsoever towards the sinners nor their sins. While this realization may have been fueled by emotion, it is this emotion that led to an understanding, the knowledge that it is not possible to separate unrepenting sinner from sin, and this is where it would seem he has finally gained the intellect and wisdom that his journey through Hell was meant to show him.

Unfortunately, Dante continues his journey in Purgatory only utilizing reason. In this way, he has gone from one extreme to the other, having abandoned all humanity in order to cope with all he has seen in Hell. In Purgatory, he slowly rediscovers his humanity, first through the sight of his own shadow and then through the story of Pia, a woman who forgave her husband for murdering her, acknowledging that he is a flawed mortal who could still someday return to God and ask for forgiveness, and expressing a form of love towards both her husband and towards God. Dante, then, understands that, not only is it possible to love other humans in a non-lustful way while still loving God, loving other humans despite their flaws and sins is an ideal manner of expressing one's love for God because it allows one to forgive others and honor repentance in the same way that God acknowledges our repentance and forgives us for our sins. Once Dante begins to rediscover what it means to love divinely, he encounters Beatrice who helps him see the true value in embracing emotion as a way to banish, confess, and repent sins. Eventually, Dante realizes that he needs an equal and balanced understanding of both intellect/reason and emotion to understand the need to repent for his sins and to continue to love both God and mortals in a divine manner.



Figure 2: Dante and Virgil in Inferno

Photo Credit: Britannica.com

Duality of Love and Sin

Dante's journey to balance love and sin stems from his journey to balance emotion and intellect. At first, he is unable to understand the difference between the two or whether the difference matters because he had lost his connection with both God and his own humanity. This loss led to both a difficulty in separating sin from sinner and a lack of understanding of what love truly is. He was unable to come to terms with the fact that he may be just as sinful as those punished in Hell, so he developed sympathy for both the sin and those who committed the sin. In the same way, he began to see lust as equivalent with love, thus forgetting the value of love, both for God and for others. Virgil first teaches him about the process of free will, how each person has the God-given ability to make their own decisions, and how it connects to love. Love is not inherently sinful because it is natural, but human souls were not given "no merit whether [they] go straight or crooked" or the inability to be blamed for sinful acts because they possess the "noble virtue...[of] free will" (Purgatorio, XVIII 45-46, 74). Humans have and have always had the ability to choose and reason for themselves and how they go about using this ability to choose what or how to love, as well as whether or not they choose to repent for sins done out of misdirected love, determines the strength of their divine love. By avoiding temptations of all kind, one can prove themselves dedicated to both God and to bettering themselves. Encountering Beatrice forces Dante to address his relationship with her. She helps him to avoid temptation and sees the good in him that he has momentarily forgotten. This helps him understand her as a symbol of divine love. This, combined with his newfound understanding of the importance of forgiveness from Pia, allows him to realize that the only way to obtain true and divine love is to not only confess and repent sin but also to forgive oneself for the sins they truly repent. Dante truly regrets his prior sins and, for those sins, he is allowed to forgive himself because, if he asks the same of God, how can he not ask it of himself? Through this, he sees, understands, and will continue to apply the knowledge that it is only through acts of love, including but not limited to asking for forgiveness, accepting it, and confessing sins, that one can even attempt to begin to overcome sin.

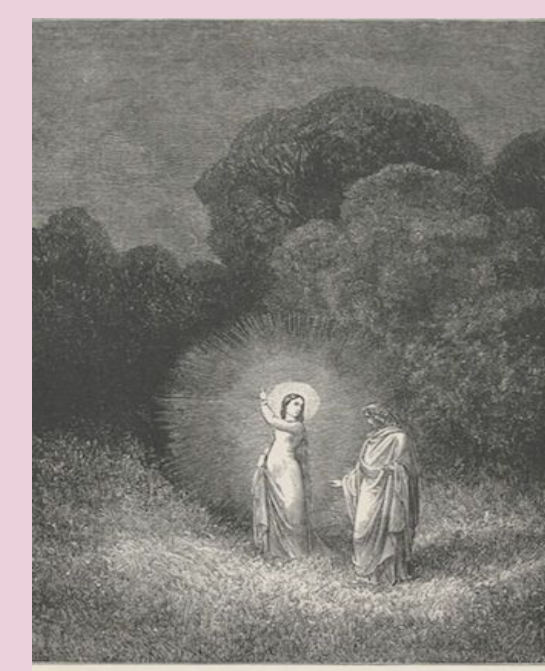


Figure 3: Dante and Beatrice

Photo Credit: Study.com

Literature Cited

See Attached Pages

Role of Virgil and Beatrice

Since the poet comes from a place of knowing, it is understood that he is aware the pilgrim will require guidance, which is where both Virgil and Beatrice gain significance. Dante the pilgrim's initial fear of the journey ahead of him, while understandable, is what is holding him back from embarking on it. He wants to improve his relationship with God but going through Hell to do so frightens him greatly, mostly because he has lost a significant amount of his faith in God to look out for him and protect him. Virgil is Dante's official guide, possibly due to Dante the poet's knowledge of Virgil as a fellow poet, as well as the possibility of the fact that the pilgrim may find some solace in Virgil's company during this initially harrowing experience. However, it slowly becomes obvious that Virgil is presented as the pilgrim's first guide because he is known for his striking intellect and wise words, two things that Dante does possess himself but that get masked by his instinct to react emotionally. Aside from physically walking him towards Paradise, it becomes Virgil's job to instruct Dante how to approach situations, especially those pertaining to sin and sinners, with an outlook that is balanced between the dualities of wisdom and emotion.

Before reaching the edge of Paradise, Dante faces the question of free will and the role it has when concerning his relationship with Beatrice. His attempts to ignore his love for her in favor of establishing what he considers true or divine love are interrupted by a dream he has in which a Siren attempts to seduce him and a woman he determines as Beatrice forces him to awaken, thus luring him from temptation. Beatrice becomes a symbol of reason, and, in this way, "reason...[was able] to leash love," love in this context being lust disguised as love (Potter 61). This helps Dante to see that the way he loves Beatrice is no longer centered on lust or temptation but, rather, divinity. Once he meets Beatrice on the edge of Paradise, Virgil leaves him and he is distraught. Beatrice, however, criticizes him for his misdirected emotions, and it is revealed that, following her death, "the actual cause of Dante's tormented longing was a woman, [Beatrice] who did in fact have power over him,... [and his] love-provoked anguish" led him to fall victim to temptation and, thus, sin (Potter 61). Eventually, he gave up ever being able to find the man he was before Beatrice died because he simply did not know how to begin going about reestablishing a connection with God. Beatrice seemed to understand that Dante "fell so low" that salvation was not guaranteed, so she interceded before God through "[her] prayers offered with tears," and granted him the opportunity to go on this journey and find himself again, the good man she knew him as when she was alive and not the man he became following her death (Purgatorio, XXX 136, 140-141). She does not want Dante to hide his emotions; instead, she acts as a guide of emotion and teaches him how to properly confess and repent his sins to obtain a balance between emotions that come as a result of love and those that stem from sin, as well as how to use his gained rationality to balance love and sin.

Role of Maturity

Overall, maturity defined Dante's journey. It is Dante the poet who understands the pilgrim's lack of maturity and the need for a journey that will enable him to find it. This lack of maturity is evident in the way that the pilgrim struggles because he is trying far too hard to embrace only one side of each duality, be it only intellect, only emotion, only love, or only sin. After Beatrice died, he found himself committing the sin of excess love towards Earthly desires. He was unable to function without Beatrice, so he abandoned all sense of intellect or divine love. In Hell, he needed Virgil to guide him as if he were a child, often looking to him for the answers or clinging to him. Without Virgil, at the end of Purgatorio, he responds to Beatrice's honesty and bluntness initially with offense and sadness "for bitter tastes the savor of stern pity" (Purgatorio, XXX 80-81). However, in Hell, he learns the importance of maintaining intellect when it comes to rejecting sin as a concept, and, in Purgatorio, he understands the importance of emotion when it comes to divine love and asking for forgiveness from God for sins committed when the balance between intellect and emotion, as well as love and sin, was skewed in his mind. The poet, it seems, understood that he needed to mature and accept responsibility for his own sins and learn how to put aside his arrogance and admit when he is wrong, so he has Beatrice tell the pilgrim to, "on behalf of the world that lives evilly... be sure to write down" all that he has seen and all he has experienced and learned (Barolini 1). Through being willing to accept this help from his guides that the poet offers him, the pilgrim slowly learns that balance between each side of each duality is the only true way to live and the only true way to continue to live a life that will one day lead him to Paradise.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that this use of multiple dualities leads to Dante discovering the importance of balance, namely learning how to balance being a human who will inevitably sin and may be more likely to react irrationally with being someone who seeks only pure love. It is quite fitting, then, that the Comedy began with a man lost, not only physically and metaphorically, but also within duality, and ends with a man, who will inevitably make mistakes but will always continue to be open to personal growth and follow everything he has learned to show the extent of his pure and divine love.