



## A STUDY OF THEMES AND AESTHETICS IN ELUCIDATING LOVE AS A THEME IN DANTE ALIGHIERI'S VITA NUOVA.

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### KEYWORDS :

Dante was an Italian poet, prose writer, literary theorist, moral philosopher and political thinker. He was born on May 21<sup>st</sup> and he is best known for his monumental epic poem; *La Divina Comedia* (The Divine Comedy). Although the Divine Comedy is very well-known literary piece, this often overlooks the other works he has done as well. He is seen as the father of modern Italian, and his works have flourished even after his death in 1321. How did Dante's *Vita Nuova* change the perception of romance and love in the time of the 13th century; furthermore, how did it change the belief of people view literary works of romance in the modern era?

Dante was born into a family with a historic involvement in the complex Florence political scene. His mother died around when he was twelve years old, and it was arranged that he would be marrying Gemma Donati, the daughter of a family friend. Around 1285, when Dante was in his early twenties, they got married, however, he was in love with another woman, Beatrice Portinari, who was a major influence in a lot of his works, including those such as *Vita Nuova* and *The Divine Comedy*. Dante met Beatrice when she was only nine years old, however, according to him, it was love at first sight. They were acquainted for years, however, Dante's love for Beatrice was courtly; loving her from afar.

*Vita Nuova* (1292 – 1294) is the first of Dante's major writings. It is a supreme work of love; thirty – one set of poems, inked by a lyrical prose narrative celebrating and debating the subject of love. In the opening chapter Dante sets himself the task of giving meaning to poetry which he composed and the events which took place after his meeting with Beatrice and the 'Lord of Love'. The 'new life' which this meeting inspired is the subject of Dante's most profound creation, which has been read variously as biography, religious allegory, and a meditation on poetry itself. Dante's *Vita Nuova* brought together Dante's poetic efforts from before 1283 to roughly 1292-93, which shows us the major and time changing impact his work had on the world. The thesis of analyzing Dante's work; *Vita Nuova*, is important, for us to understand the wide range of themes that were proposed by him in his literary works. It helps us look at the literary devices used by him, the hidden meaning of all of them, as well, allowing us to link back to the state he was in when he wrote this set of poems, the emotions and life changing stages he went through.

The *Vita Nuova* is not only a historical piece of compiled poetry, and a visage of medieval Christianity, and not only remembered because in it, Dante boldly chose to write in Italian and not Latin. No literary work is ever popular because of its historical value only, but also that of the depth of the words, the meaning, the raw, unfiltered emotions.

The review of literature includes "Love and Civitas: Dante's Ethical Journey in the *Vita Nuova*", The New Republic's "Dante's *Vita Nuova*: Falling in Love with Love". I have also read other papers read in regards to that of a proper breakdown of Dante's *Vita Nuova*, have been those from JSTOR, such as "The Symmetrical Structure of Dante's *Vita Nuova*", a Journal Article by Kenneth McKenzie and "The Allegory of *Vita Nuova*" by Jefferson B. Fletcher. These journal articles have been very useful to me, as they were allowing me

to see the stylistic devices used by Dante, such as sonnets, imagery, allegory to create a themes of unconditional love, healing nature of love and the idea of love being eternal. Additionally, I have read the *Vita Nuova* by Dante, the Oxford Copy, "Dante: *Vita Nuova*, a translation by Mark Musa" and done annotations, which allowed me to frame my research paper effectively.

In this set of poems and prose; *Vita Nuova*, Dante describes different aspects of love with the use of poetic devices such as hyperbole, sonnets and ballads. He experiences grief, remorse, but also the beauty of being in love, and falling in love. Unconditional love, healing and forgiving nature of love, grief is some of the themes I observed in this set of poems.

He had fallen in love with her ever since he had the first glance of her. It was what people like to term as 'love at first sight'. He was a poet, a wonderful one, that is. He spun his web of words in such a manner that, it created a beautiful, splendid yet melancholic set of pieces of work, which was put into the collection of '*Vita Nuova*'. "Chapter V: *I heard someone near me say: 'See how that man is utterly consumed for the sake of that lady'; and as they named the lady, I realized that they were speaking of the one who had been in direct line between the most gracious Beatrice and my gaze*". He had been utterly in love with her ever since he was a little boy. He was enchanted by her goddess – like beauty; and was lured into her spell just by a singular glance. The Power of Love. '*She appeared dressed in the most noble of colors, a subdued and decorous crimson*', '*Love governed my soul*' - Chapter II. Dante sees Beatrice as so full of natural dignity and admirable bearing that certainly the words of the poet Homer suited her well: "*She did not seem to be the daughter of an ordinary man, but rather of a god*". "*she greeted me so miraculously that I felt I was experiencing the very summit of bliss. It was precisely the ninth hour of that day (three o'clock in the afternoon), when her sweet greeting reached me*". In these extracts, he uses poetic devices of hyperbole, where he exaggerates excessively to showcase his love for her, his admiration for her. He uses the structure of sonnets throughout his poems, showing the reader his train of thought, and also his romanticized ideology towards love, by placing sonnets in a lyrical manner, almost like a song, luring the readers in.

In Part V, he mentions, "*I hear someone near me say: See how that man is utterly consumed for the sake of that lady; and as they named the lady, I realized that they were speaking of the one who had been in direct line between the most gracious Beatrice and my gaze*". This extract from the book indicates that he is so utterly enchanted by her, by her gaze and her presence, that even the people around him notice him getting lost in her eyes and her beauty. Some other poetic devices commonly used by the poet were those of 25 sonnets and multiple ballads used throughout the series of poems; in the entirety of the set of poems; *Vita Nuova*.

The remorse and grief of losing his lover; Beatrice, is seen in the VIII part of *Vita Nuova*; "*I saw her body lying lifeless in the midst of many ladies who were weeping most pitifully*". The stylistic device that is highlighted in this part are the two sonnets that he had devised for her, the first beginning being

'If Love', and the second beginning being; 'Brute death'. He divides the sonnet into three parts. In the first part he calls and implores upon Love's faithful to weep. In the third part he speaks of an honor that Love bestowed upon his lady; Beatrice. This was his first sonnet; 'If Love'.

In his second sonnet, where he addresses Death, the one who stole him from his beloved Beatrice. He addresses Death in many different names, such as 'the enemy of tenderness', 'timeless mother of grief', and most important of all, the title of the sonnet itself; 'Brute Death'. In the second part, he tells Death why he curses it; "for your sick source of grief in my heart, that I must bear in misery, my tongue consumes itself with cursing you, and If I wanted to make you beg for mercy, I only need reveal, your felonies, your guilt of every guilt". In the third part, he criticizes it in an abusive manner, "not that you are known for what you are, but rather to inflame, whoever hopes for sustenance in love." In the fourth stanza he turns to speaking to an apparently indefinite person, yet very definite to the mind, "you have destroyed all love's light - heartedness. Who might this lady be I shall not say, save that her qualities reveal her name; who does not earn salvation, let him not hope to share her company".

This becomes a beautiful sonnet, since he expresses and personifies Death in such a way that, he is envious of it for taking his beloved away from him; Beatrice. He had fallen in love with her at first sight, ever since they were children. He curses at death for stealing her from him, and conveys the feelings within the depths of his heart with great compassion and complexity. The use of the sonnet is done to give a sense of realism and purpose, and to communicate the different emotions he feels; his expression of remorse. Dante uses the sonnets which are structured in a strict metric construction, usually iambic pentameter. The iambic pentameter describes the construction of a line of poetry, with five sets of unstressed syllables followed by stressed syllables. It is relevant to the composition of a sonnet, since its purpose is to keep an 'ear - pleasing rhythm'. Sonnets are widely used throughout the Vita Nuova, creating a lyrical and appeasing structure of poems for the readers to observe.

The forgiving nature of love allows people to accept and respect each other, and understand one another better. The forgiving nature of love in Vita Nuova, is seen in part XI, where he mentions in regards to seeing her; a vision of her perhaps, and that he would hold no man his enemy, and reply to each question free of pride with 'Love'. "Whenever and wherever she appeared in anticipation of her marvelous greeting, I held no man my enemy, and there burned within me a flame that consumed all past offences; and during this time if anyone had asked me about anything, my answer with face free of all pride, could only have been 'Love'". This helps us in magnifying on the point that he forgets any type of envy, or negative emotion he felt towards other people when he saw her. It's almost as if she was his cure to any form of negative emotion. It also shows amplification upon the theme of unconditional love and the healing nature of love. We say this because, with the help of the imagery, we are able to understand that he forgets any issues he had with anyone whenever he sees her. She provides him with the healing nature of love simply by her presence. As is seen in the lines, "and there burned within me a flame that consumed all past offences and during this time if anyone had asked me about anything, my answer with face free of pride, could only have been 'Love'". The 'burning flame' indicates the burning feeling of love. How the burning is so strong and deep, the love for the person is extremely stark, that it purifies all grudges. Vivid imagery is used here, in order for the readers to understand the healing nature of Love.

The forgiving nature of love. This is symbolized as he continues to talk about the magical effect love has on him. He

uses tactile imagery to showcase this. This is seen in part XXII of this collection of poems; Vita Nuova, "O you who comes this way so mournfully... Love's image in her face?", "O ladies tell me: it is her grace .... tell me truly what you know of her. I see your eyes, I see how they have wept, and how you come retreating all undone; my heart is touched and shaken at the sight". He uses the stylistic device of a sonnet, to help him in elaborating on how he was able to forgive Beatrice for leaving him through the power and influence of Love. He links forgiveness with the divine nature of Love. A sonnet is a fourteen - line poem with a fixed rhyme scheme. A sonnet is essentially a lyrical poem, and they allow the reader to read easily and understand the emotions conveyed by the poet. Dante has divided the sonnet into two parts. In the first he calls upon these ladies and asks them if they come from his lady, telling them that he believes that they do since they return as if made more gracious. In the second, he asks them to talk to him about her. This is where the second sonnet had started, 'And if you come'. In these extracts, he is mourning for her, the loss of his lover, and he uses imagery to convey this message to the readers. The structure of sonnets complements the themes observed in the compilation of poems, Vita Nuova, such as grief, remorse, the power of love, the healing nature of love, and most importantly; unconditional love.

Poetry is intricate and can be perceived in many ways. It is not limited to a singular perception. Dante's work with his artistic imagery and great use of stylistic devices such as sonnets, allows readers to connect with the text effectively, since the text allows them to relate it to their situations, surroundings and past occurrences. It is an important catalyst for love, since, it allows us to express how we truly feel in a magnificent manner through the spinning of words into a golden, shimmering cloth, that personifies our mind and thoughts.

As we read the Vita Nuova, we realize the way the teen adults perceive love as compared to how it was known to be earlier. Nowadays, genuine romantic love is a gem that is rare. Dante had unconditional love for Beatrice, and that is seen in many extracts in the Love is complicated. It cannot be defined and is completely subjective to each person. It is beautiful and magnificent, yet so powerful that it pains the heart to see their beloved in pain, or even in extreme cases such as that observed in this set of poems published by Dante; Vita Nuova, death of Beatrice, his lover. Love allows us to move on and forgive the people who hurt us in the past, and that speaks in regards to the healing nature of love. Dante forgave Beatrice for leaving him, and as he personified and met 'Love', he allowed himself to move on from the greatest tragedy of Beatrice.

He depicts the different stages of love and falling in love with Beatrice through his poetry. This lets the readers connect with his poems, since love is not only romantic, but also platonic and unconditional. We relate it to the people around us, such as our friends giving us platonic love, our parents providing us with the unconditional love which keeps us going, and a partner, providing us with the romantic love to fuel our soul and provide a bittersweet sensation to the heart.

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