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Discussion Questions Dante's *Paradiso*

**Q1: Consider the characters and relationship of Dante and Beatrice. Why is their relationship important to the reader when trying to interpret the message of the story?**

When answering this question a distinction must be made between Dante the author and Dante within the context of *Paradiso*. Dante the author is trying to do the impossible: articulate Heaven to those who have never experienced the afterlife, and he is very self aware that this task is daunting. In canto 1 he begs Apollo to make him a “vessel of thy power” to explain the unexplainable, uncharted territory of the holy afterlife to convey to the grandness of Paradise (Dante 14). He accomplishes this by having Dante the character act as the human within this narrative. Dante the character is addressed in the narrative as a pilgrim, which is a foreigner venturing to a new place, a sacred place for refuge. Acting as a pilgrim, to me, is inherently part of the human experience, constantly trying to find answers to the tough existential questions for salvation then doubting the answers to only ask more questions. The cycle of questioning and doubting is the reason Beatrice is also a character in the story. Beatrice, though not God, acts as the knowledgeable one for truth in the holy realm. Instead of shutting down the doubts of the pilgrim, she acts as a voice of reason by embracing the pilgrims cycle of doubt and reasoning. The dialogue between the pilgrim and Beatrice reminds me of someone going to a pope or pastor trying to decipher the word of God to apply it to their life, creating their belief system based on a religious text. Dante included the relationship between the pilgrim and Beatrice for the reader to have the familiarity of having both sides: the doubt and the answers. Both are two sides of the same coin, needing to exist with each other for a reader to understand something that they will never experience until they inevitably pass to the afterlife.

**Q2: How does Beatrice answer Dante's first doubt in Canto 4? Do you agree or disagree with her judgment?**

Dante's first doubt stems from hearing a glimpse into a life of a spirit named Piccarda. He learns that she's stuck in a lower level of paradise because she betrayed her vow of being a nun

by marrying a man even though the marriage was against her consent. Dante questions if the violence enacted upon someone should “decrease the measure of [their] merit” if goodness is permanent, like vowing to be a nun (Dante, 21). Beatrice argues through faith that two things can be true at the same time. Though yes, Piccarda’s violence was enacted on her, her reluctance to escape is what ultimately broke her vow with God. Beatrice’s argument stems from the idea of absolute vs conditioned will. The difference between the two is that when faced with violence conditional will gives in to the violence with fearing the consequences if they don’t give in, while absolute will is fearless when considering the consequences. Beatrice argues that if Piccarda had absolute will she would have fought back against her abductors, not fearing being beaten or death, to still be a nun. It’s hard when placing my opinion on Beatrice’s argument because I empathize with Piccarda’s situation, but in the end she did make a vow that should be honored and respected despite whatever violence comes her way.