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A Trip Through the Divine Comedy: An Allegory for Depression and its Role in Bibliotherapy

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language  
East Tennessee State University  
In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for the English Honors-in-Discipline program

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by  
Matthew Ryan Curry  
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Dr. Joshua Reid, Chair

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## Abstract

A Trip Through the Divine Comedy: An Allegory for Depression and its Role in Bibliotherapy

by

Matthew Ryan Curry

Dante the Pilgrim, the main character of Dante Alighieri's *La Divina Commedia*, has his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven recorded by Dante the Poet in poetic form. In the literal sense of things, readers follow Dante the Pilgrim's journey downward into the infernal hellscape, upward onto a mountain of purgation and atonement, and into the metaphysical world of the divine. Allegorically, however, readers can also choose to view Dante the Pilgrim's journey through *The Divine Comedy* as that of a person experiencing the hopelessness of depression, the challenging climb upward and outward of healing after spiraling deeply inward and, then, upon the journey's conclusion, rejoicing in streams of light as the heavy weight of the darkness—of depression—is lifted. Throughout this thesis, I isolate instances scattered throughout Dante's poetry that can allegorically represent the journey one undertakes as the fog of depression settles in and the valid possibility of including the medieval work into the practice of bibliotherapy.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

“Here my high imagining failed of power; but / already my desire and the *velle* were turned, like / a wheel being moved evenly, / by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

-Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*

The journey that the protagonist of Dante Alighieri’s *The Divine Comedy*, Dante the Pilgrim, takes through the *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* can be read as an allegory for the journey one takes through depression. In the journey’s literal sense, Dante the Pilgrim discovers himself in a dark wood, walking through the gates of Hell and spiraling into the infernal depths, climbing the steep mountain of Purgatory, and experiencing the celestial rose and eternal love of Paradise.

However, allegorically, the journey can also be read as an individual wandering aimlessly through the darkness that accompanies depression, descending into the intense agony and desperation that makes the mental illness the silent killer, embracing the tough, upward climb into healing, and experiencing life in its renewed sense when the pains of depression—of the infernal wasteland—are left behind.

Fundamentally, human emotion is an integral part of the human psyche. Though the art of feeling is an incredibly beautiful experience, emotions are not always the positive chemical messages our brains desire to receive. Sadness, a common and healthy emotion to experience in regulation, can overtake someone’s life—can deeply root itself into their core and perpetuate long episodes of complete, clinical despair.

Through the power of literature and, particularly, bibliotherapy, readers can confront their own internalized darkness just as the main character does—a simultaneous experience of catharsis, self-discovery, and growth. Utilizing literature in a therapeutic sense is still a fairly

modern practice in terms of clinical application; however, humans have turned to the wisdom buried deep within literary works as a way of solving identity, societal, and global issues for thousands of years.

Recording his own journey from the darkness into the light, Dante Alighieri's poetry offers a unique perspective into the human psyche as it transitions from a place of immense hardship (*Inferno*) into a place constructed on the idea of eternal peace and love (*Paradiso*). Because of this, readers utilizing bibliotherapy are afforded the opportunity to follow along in real-time—to commence a journey of their own and let Dante's literature be the guide. Approaching the sense of community introduced in *Purgatorio* and fully established within *Paradiso* may show bibliotherapeutic users that are suffering from an MDE that it is time to reintegrate themselves into the larger world—that is, if they've isolated themselves.

## Chapter 2

**Bibliotherapy and its Importance in Treating Clinical Depression**

“Over all the sand there rained, with slow falling, / broad flakes of fire, like snow in the mountains / without wind.”

-Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

Definition of Clinical Depression

The criteria for reaching the diagnosis of clinical depression have changed as further medical research has been conducted; however, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition: DSM-5* contains a comprehensive list of the requirements one must meet in order to reach a clinical diagnosis. In the article “DSM-5 Criteria and Severity: Implications for Clinical Practice,” it is stated that:

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), the diagnosis of a Major Depression Episode (MDE) requires five or more symptoms to be present within a 2-week period. One of the symptoms should, at least, be either a depressed mood (DM) or anhedonia (loss of interest or pleasure- LI). The secondary symptoms of MDE are appetite or weight changes (AW), sleep difficulties (insomnia or hypersomnia), psychomotor agitation or retardation (PAR), fatigue or loss of energy (FE), diminished ability to think or concentrate (C), feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt (FW), and suicidality (SU) (para. 1).

While statistics show that more and more people are experiencing a Major Depression Episode at some point within their life, there have been reports documenting depression’s side effects that date back millennia. Tracking the rise of the statistics, the article “Depression Is on the Rise in the U.S., Especially Among Young Teens” states that: “The results show that depression increased significantly among persons in the U.S. from 2005 to 2015, from 6.6 percent to 7.3

percent. Notably, the rise was most rapid among those ages 12 to 17, increasing from 8.7 percent in 2005 to 12.7 percent in 2015” (para. 4). And, in the book *Major Depressive Disorder*, the timeline for depression is more accurately established when the authors state: “The history of depression dates back millennia to the beginning of recorded human history. Descriptions of depression appear in Ancient Egyptian papyri as well as the Indian Mahabharata” (1). An ancient illness, one whose journey is traced by Dante himself, is still growing in prevalence within the United States.

Group therapy, a proven technique in assisting rehabilitation, could be an ideal setting to pursue a bibliotherapeutic treatment option. However, in the classroom setting under the direction of an educator familiar with the bibliotherapeutic approach, treatment and rehabilitation may be possible.

#### Definition of Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy, though a relatively modern form of therapy—its name coined by Samuel Crothers in the early twentieth century—has served as an effective tool for social workers and clinicians in the treatment of depression. Bibliotherapy has shown itself to be a reliable source of treatment for overcoming a plethora of instances that may cause cognitive dissonance (e.g., foster care, divorce, child abuse, sexual orientation, death, etc.). However, the therapeutic benefits are not solely limited to mental health professionals. Educators—or anyone with bibliotherapeutic knowledge, for that matter—can utilize the bibliotherapeutic tools in an effort to help individuals overcome life’s inevitable challenges.

Robert Barker, in his book *Dictionary of Social Work*, provides a straightforward definition of bibliotherapy that was utilized by the authors of *Bibliotherapy: A Clinical Approach for Helping Children*:

The use of literature and poetry in the treatment of people with emotional problems or mental illness. Bibliotherapy is often used in social group work and group therapy and is reported to be effective with people of all ages, with people in institutions as well as outpatients, and with healthy people who wish to share literature as a means of personal growth and development (15).

This definition, whether intentionally or unintentionally is unclear, outlines the classroom as a perfect environment for the utilization of the bibliotherapeutic approach. Educators that are familiar with the literature may integrate the phases of bibliotherapy into their instruction as a means of facilitating the remission of an MDE or offering support in the rehabilitation process—however, this does not advocate for the educator’s right to deem an MDE sufferer healed. Educators are not, and do not claim to be, certified clinicians.

### Bibliotherapy and its Role in Treating Clinical Depression

Research has confirmed the claim that literature—fiction and non-fiction alike—can be used as a therapeutic tool. The positive emotional and mental benefits are real and measurable. Pardeck and Pardeck state in their book that there are three phases, or stages, that the bibliotherapeutic approach must transition through: “*identification and projection, abreaction and catharsis, and insight and integration*” (11).

Identification and projection is the phase that begins the bibliotherapeutic process. Though research suggests that bibliotherapy can be implemented by a single individual without the guidance of a practitioner, teacher, or guardian, this beginning stage would be more effectively applied and utilized by the reader—the patient or client, in clinical terms—if a formal guide were to exist. This phase gets its name by the actions that are to be taken by the readers: they must begin finding conflict similarities between the protagonist and themselves (though research could be conducted to disprove the claim that the sole responsibility falls onto the protagonist, following the lead character is likely to produce better results as that is the character most often experienced by the reader), and, afterward, the reader must internalize the character's motive and begin speculating about the valid, applicable traits that can be taken from the story and incorporated into their own life as a means of conflict resolution or conflict understanding (Pardeck and Pardeck).

Transitioning into phase two of the approach, abreaction and catharsis is the stage that will formally require the guidance of an outside source onto the reader. However, it does seem entirely possible for an individual to gain therapeutic benefits by exploring the literature alone; but, much like Dante the Pilgrim experiences increased success with his guide, Vergil, readers too would experience greater success following an educator, social worker, or clinician. For catharsis to occur, Pardeck and Pardeck state, “the client must experience an emotional release that is expressed in a number of ways, including verbal and nonverbal means” (11). Pardeck and Pardeck also emphasize the importance of the emotional monitoring of readers/clients that is needed by guides (11).

The final phase, insight and integration, is the stage in which “the client is guided by the practitioner [or educator, social worker, guide, etc.] to recognize solutions to a problem through

the literature” (11). Earlier in their overview of bibliotherapy, Pardeck and Pardeck also discuss one of the essential requirements of the bibliotherapeutic approach: “When fiction is used in treatment, the fiction must accurately portray the problem confronting the client” (11). This fundamental principle becomes abundantly evident within the insight and integration phase.

### Student Bibliotherapeutic Benefits

Students and non-students alike that stumble upon Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and read the main character’s journey through the allegorical lens discussed in the introduction will have access to the literature’s wisdom as it pertains to psychological healing and trudging out of a personal “dark wood.”

However, students of the *Commedia* may be more susceptible to receiving the bibliotherapeutic benefits. Dante designed his *Divine Comedy* to be a work of literature that would serve as its own formal guide for readers—and the journey of his protagonist were agents of change within my own life. Undertaking a spiritual journey in unison with the poem’s main character, I experienced my own form of catharsis as my relatability to the literature strengthened. Long before I stumbled into the literary dark wood of Dante’s construction, I had been in my own allegorical wood for some time. However, it was Dante the Pilgrim’s descent into the infernal hellscape that truly propelled me forward into an inward spiral of my own.

Dante the Poet, in an effort to bring readers through a repeatable, intense psychological journey, had captured my psyche and glued it to that of Dante the Pilgrim. I internalized the wisdom interwoven throughout the text and progressed through my personal—spiritual and emotional—journey with a vitality that was no doubt fueled by the *Commedia*’s insight.

Dante's *Divine Comedy* served as a personal emotional release for me. As Dante the Pilgrim uncovered new layers of Hell, I was uncovering new layers of the person buried deep within me. Dante Alighieri and his literary works served as an existential influence in my personal development, self-discovery, and psychological healing—and this was the motivating factor behind the construction of this thesis.

## Chapter 3

**Dante Alighieri and His Own Struggle with Mental Health**

“Ah, deluded souls, wicked creatures who / twist your hearts away from such a good, / directing your faces toward emptiness!”

-Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*

Born in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Dante Alighieri experienced his own share of troubles—particularly political and romantic. Though we can’t say for certain that the incidents of his life were definitive psychological causes of a Major Depression Episode, the probability of them being so is relatively high.

Experiencing what seems to be “love at first sight,” Dante recounts his run-in with Beatrice in his famous work *Vita Nuova*. However, within that same work, Dante also discusses her untimely death and the personal and societal implications that it created: “After this most gracious creature had gone out from among us, the whole city came to be as it were widowed and despoiled of all dignity” (280). Although Dante had seemingly found his true soul mate within Beatrice Portinari, they would never, and could never, marry—never become interconnected at all, in truth. Despite this, the death of Beatrice would prove to carry extreme negative turmoil within Dante himself. This, combined with Dante’s political downfall and ultimate exile, could have become subconscious—or deliberate—motivators for Dante’s construction of the deep-rooted psychological allegory present within *The Divine Comedy*.

Prior to his exile and prior to the resurgence of the Black Guelf political faction, Dante was experiencing success in his political career. Marco Santagata, in reference to Dante’s political success, states that Dante would be “to become the first and only Alighieri to occupy the highest seat in the city hierarchy in that fateful year of 1300” (96). As we can see, Dante was

experiencing the highest of highs prior to his great political collapse. This collapse, in combination with the death and romantic unfulfillment of Beatrice and the forced abandonment of his family, estate, and possessions, could be marked as extreme psychological pressures that might have served as inciting incidents in Dante's own struggle with an MDE.

The true devastation experienced by Dante as a result of his exile from Florence is put into perspective in Canto 17 of *Paradiso*:

You will leave behind everything beloved most  
dearly, and this is the arrow that the bow of exile  
first lets fly.

You will experience how salty tastes the bread  
of another, and what a hard path it is to descend  
and mount by another's stairs.

And what will most weigh upon your shoulders  
will be the wicked, dimwitted company with whom  
you will fall into this valley,  
who will become utterly ungrateful, mad, and  
cruel against you, but shortly after they, not you,  
will blush (17.55-66).

“You will leave behind everything beloved most / dearly, and this is the arrow that the bow of exile / first lets fly” is clearly a reference to Dante's politically forced abandonment of his wife, Gemma, and their children, in Florence. He is reconstructing the deep psychological wounds for readers to experience—the raw emotions that his exile brought to the surface.

Dante's association with the White Guelf political faction in Italy had ultimately led to his exile from Florentine society. His cognitive dissonance plays out in this short excerpt from *Paradiso*. Not only is Dante expressing the literal changes that come with exile ("how salty tastes the bread / of another"), metaphorically, he is diving further toward the root of the distress. Because of his forced departure from his homeland, under the penalty of death if he were to return, Dante is representing the underlying identity crisis that was the result thereof.

After his exile, Dante plunged into the hardships that have historically accompanied poverty. He was banished with a fraction of his finances, and his ties to his estate were cut. To Dante, this could have felt like any semblance of his old life was destroyed, left to be buried beneath the shadows of history.

The drastic shift from occupying one of the highest political seats in Florence to a total outcast could have been some of the many psychological triggers that brought the MDE upon Dante. That, coupled with his eternally unsatisfied love, could have served as the sparks that ignited the idea of the *Inferno* within the genius mind of Dante Alighieri.

## Chapter 4

***Inferno and the Spiral into Depression***

“My leader and I entered on that hidden path to / return to the bright world; and, without taking / care for rest at all, up we climbed, he first and I second, until I saw / the beautiful things the heaven carry, through a round opening.”

-Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*

It is no coincidence that the beginning of the *Commedia*, the prologue that is Canto 1 of the *Inferno*, begins with Dante the Pilgrim finding himself in a dark wood:

In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to  
myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost.

Ah, how hard a thing it is to say what that wood  
was, so savage and harsh and strong that the  
thought of it renews my fear!

It is so bitter that death is little more so! But to  
treat of the good that I found there, I will tell of  
the other things I saw.

I cannot really say how I entered there, so full of  
sleep was I at the point when I abandoned the true  
way (1.1-12).

It is certainly true that this canto's beginning can be interpreted as the poet experiencing a mid-life crisis; however, there seems to be more at play here. There is a possibility that Dante the Poet is attempting to illustrate to readers the cognitive dissonance and darkness often associated with depression through his use of deliberate metaphors: “Ah, how hard a thing it is to say what that wood / was, so savage and harsh and strong that the / thought of it renews my fear!” Many

MDE sufferers make claims about the harshness of their disorder—and their abundant fear of a relapse if proper therapeutic benefits and remission are achieved.

According to the article “Willow Weep for Me—A Black Woman’s Journey Through Depression,” by Meri Nana-Ama Danquah—incorporated into the book *First Person Accounts of Mental Illness and Recovery*—Danquah recounts her experience with depression when she begins with: “My relationship with depression began long before I noticed it” (61). Here, like Dante, Danquah had blindly stumbled her way into a dark wood. She continues with: “When I went out into the city, I would always become disoriented, often spacing out behind the wheel of my car or in the middle of a sentence. My thoughts would just disappear. I’d forget where I was driving to, the point I was about to make in conversation” (61). What is most strikingly similar and parallels Dante’s poetry is Danquah’s claim that she would “forget where [she] was going.” Dante establishes relatability with Danquah when he says: “I cannot really say how I entered there, so full of / sleep was I at the point when I abandoned the true / way.” Dante the Pilgrim, like Danquah, suffered severe memory impairment.

Unfortunately, feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness are common identifying traits of a Major Depression Episode. The famous opening of Canto 3 of the *Inferno* encapsulates the extremity of true hopelessness to be faced by the poem’s protagonist:

Through me the way into the Grieving City,  
 through me the way into eternal sorrow,  
 through me the way among the lost people.  
 Justice moved my high maker;  
 divine power made me,  
 highest wisdom, and primal love.

Before me were no things created

except eternal ones, and I endure eternal.

Abandon every hope, you who enter (3.1-9).

This inscription on Hell's entrance gate is symbolic for the hopelessness one is likely to experience as the symptoms of the Major Depression Episode worsen. An MDE, sometimes perpetuated by immense grief due to an instance of cognitive dissonance, is represented by "Grieving City." Death of a loved one, one of the most notorious causes for psychological distress, could have played a part in the inscription's construction—particularly the death of Beatrice.

In "My Confession: My Life Had Come to a Stop," Leo Tolstoy recounts his own struggles with his bout of depression, the true essence of the hopelessness he felt captured right at the article's beginning: "My life had come to a sudden stop. I was able to breathe, to eat, to drink, to sleep. I could not, indeed, help doing so; but there was no real life in me. I had not a single wish to strive for the fulfillment of what I could feel to be reasonable" (57). Tolstoy had abandoned all hope, just as Dante the Pilgrim and Vergil did at the crossing of Hell's gate. Tolstoy continues on with: "If I wished for anything, I knew beforehand that, were I to satisfy the wish, nothing would come of it, I should still be dissatisfied" (57).

The inscription coincides with Tolstoy's personal account: "Through me the way into the Grieving City, / through me the way into eternal sorrow, / through me the way among the lost people." Tolstoy's eternal hopelessness and lack of desire is a direct connection to Dante's creation of a land of "eternal sorrow." Dante the Poet is establishing, were Dante the Pilgrim or Vergil to have any desires or hope of their own, that the crossing of the threshold would be the termination of that.

The solidifying connection between Dante’s literary work and the allegorical representation of a journey through depression reveals itself in Canto 13—the circle of Hell housing those individuals condemned for committing violence against themselves, for committing suicide. Not only does the canto establish the suicidality symptom present within certain MDE sufferers, but it also continues the theme of darkness, hopelessness and worthlessness:

Not yet had Nessus reached the other side, when  
 we entered a wood that no path marked.  
 Not green leaves, but dark in color, not smooth  
 branches, but knotted and twisted, no fruit was there,  
 but thorns with poison.  
 Not such harsh thickets nor so dense do those  
 wild beasts hold, that hate the cultivated places  
 between Cécina and Corneto (13.1-9).

The metaphorical colorlessness—the anhedonia—of an MDE is seen with “not green leaves, but dark in color...” Like the beginning of *Inferno*, here Dante the Pilgrim is encountering another dark wood—this one perhaps more “harsh,” “knotted and twisted” than the first one. The stakes are higher here, the likelihood of pain at an all-time high. The path isn’t marked; Dante the Pilgrim is “lost.”

Similarly, at the end of his article, Tolstoy makes a startling claim: “The horror of the darkness was too great to bear, and I longed to free myself from it by a rope or a pistol ball. This was the feeling that, above all, drew me to think of suicide” (61). Dante the Poet, at the beginning of his Canto 13, is using stark imagery to relay a direct message to readers: the path of

his life had grown jagged, colorless and dark, poisonous. This could perhaps be in relation to the love he never had with Beatrice—or in relation to his exile from Florence.

However, the parallels are astounding. Tolstoy connects the darkness of his Major Depression Episode to the suicidal ideation he experienced. Similarly, we can see Dante the Poet expressing a similar relationship figuratively. Dante's connection, however, is made by the deliberate opening of Canto 13 and the relationship established between a pathless darkness weaving itself through the circle of suicides.

Having incorporated this suicide wood into the literature, it's possible that Dante Alighieri himself is making the statement that he, too, had considered suicide at some point in his life—perhaps post-exile. Dante the Poet could be constructing for readers the immense hardships and pain that accompany the suicidal ideation as a means of showcasing one of the “lowest of lows” he might have experienced within his MDE.

Coinciding with this, leading Dante the Pilgrim through the hardships, Vergil serves as the therapeutic guide. Knowing the fundamental importance of guides, Dante the Poet has constructed his literature to be a guide of its own—a crucial aspect in reaping positive results within the bibliotherapeutic process.

### The Structure of Dante's Hell

Another common association with sufferers of Major Depression Episodes is the claim of the infamous “spiral inward.” Many sufferers claim that, as a result of their severe depressive symptoms, they have begun their deep spiral inward toward a metaphorical darkness—a darkness that can only be interpreted to mean the dark, self-deprecating thoughts and excessive

guilt and blame recorded among those suffering and the intense feelings of sadness that never seem to relent.

Not coincidentally, Dante's Hell is designed as a continual spiral inward. Beginning with Hell's first circle, Limbo, the widest part of the infernal wasteland, is also the point in the *Commedia* when the depressive symptoms seem to be the mildest. Sure, Dante, like Danquah, is experiencing memory loss and the poem's beginning; however, what is most notably interesting is that, as the poem progresses, and Dante the Pilgrim is further guided inward, the depressive symptom correlations seem to strengthen. Coinciding with this, the further one progresses into Hell, the narrower and narrower the spiral inward becomes—until one encounters the ultimate adversary lurking in the deepest parts of the wasteland: Lucifer.

Scholars have also determined that Lucifer's portion of Hell is a resemblance of the strongest point of gravity—a centrality of power and energy. Allegorically, this could be Dante's way of expressing to us the immense pain center found deep within individuals suffering at the hands of an MDE. At the core of the symptoms lies a root cause, a single factor that is negatively impacting an individual's life. Those that suffer from an MDE are statistically likely to isolate themselves—to remove themselves from their role in everyday societal functions. Dante's *Inferno* is the installment of isolation, the installment that established the darkened path and poisonous inward spiral MDE sufferers experience as they begin, and proceed onward, on their journey through the illness.

The ultimate adversary being the last obstacle in Dante's Hell resembles a therapeutic release of hopelessness and worthlessness—a form of catharsis. Instead of Dante the Pilgrim and Vergil encountering Lucifer and their journey coming to an end, defeated by the one most

notorious for havoc and destruction, their journey takes a turn—upside down, technically—for the better.



Fig. 1. Salvador Dalí. *The Logician Devil*. 1959-1964. Woodcut on Rives Paper.

In Salvador Dalí's rendition of Canto 34, which is the ending of Dante the Pilgrim's journey through the *Inferno*, it is almost as if the artist consciously—or subconsciously—picked up on Dante's parallel as well. Lucifer, depicted here as the giant figure dominating the painting's foreground, seems to have a cave-like structure opening within his chest. Dante, painted and notated by the color red, and Vergil the color blue, seem to be gazing and pointing toward the cavernous structure.

From an allegorical perspective, this could be Dalí expressing Dante's claim that the only true way to freedom is through—meaning, to achieve freedom from an MDE, an individual must work through their problems, work through the things that are creating perpetual symptoms.

In the final canto of the *Inferno*, Canto 34, Dante the Poet says:

There is a place down there, removed from  
 Beelzebub as far as the width of his tomb, known not  
 by sight, but by the sound

of a little stream that descends through a hole in a rock eroded by its winding course, and it is not steep.

My leader and I entered on that hidden path to return to the bright world; and, without taking care for rest at all, up we climbed, he first and I second, until I saw the beautiful things the heavens carry, through a round opening.

And thence we came forth to look again at the stars (34.127-140).

After the encounter with Lucifer, we see Dante the Pilgrim and Vergil move onto a path—which also happens to be unmarked by sight, but noticeable “by the sound”—in an effort to progress their journey onward, toward the “beautiful things the heavens carry.” Allegorically, after confronting the deepest roots perpetuating an MDE, an individual may find the true way out, the way upward—toward healing.

## Chapter 5

**Purgatorio and the Climb Upward into Healing**

“The lovely planet that strengthens us to love was / causing all the east to laugh, veiling the Fish,  
which were her escort.”

-Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*

Transitioning from the isolationist theme of the *Inferno* into a more community-based atmosphere is one of the most notable elements of the second installment of *The Divine Comedy*—*Purgatorio*. The book *Dante’s Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* captures Dante’s shift: “If, as I have been arguing, *Purgatorio* illustrates the struggle for the recuperation or achievement of personhood, and if personhood is entirely relationally constructed, then we may better appreciate Dante’s desire to show the ways in which all sins, even the most seemingly self-centered ones, are in fact the result of damaged relations with others” (Webb 84). The author proceeds onward with: “*Purgatorio* calls not only for the recognition of this damage, but also for the painstaking work of reconstruction and reconfiguration of relation in the light of such recognition” (84).

*Purgatorio* is an installment of hope—an installment to reignite the flames of love buried deep within readers and MDE sufferers alike. Purgatory, arranged into a mountain of terraces one must climb up, is also the portion of the journey where readers encounter the spirits that are responsible for the cleansing of their own sins. As these spirits were not deserving of the infernal punishments recently experienced by the readers, and not quite ready for the beautiful luxuries of Paradise, they are deemed responsible for the completion of their own purging.

*Purgatorio* is also an installment of community, a stark contrast to the isolationist theme found within the *Inferno*. Immediately upon their introduction to Purgatory, Dante the Pilgrim

and Vergil are welcomed with a sense of community. The dark, twisted path of isolation has now given way to a world of light.

Canto 17 of *Purgatorio*, containing a direct address to the reader from Dante the Poet, encapsulates the move from hopelessness found within MDE sufferers to the overwhelming feeling of hope:

Remember, reader, if ever in the mountains a  
 fog caught you through which you saw no  
 otherwise than a mole does through its skin,  
 how, when the moist, thick vapors begin to thin  
 out, the sphere of the sun shines weakly through  
 them,  
 and your imagination will easily come to see  
 how I first saw the sun again, which was already  
 setting (17.1-9).

As we can see, the transition from the *Inferno* into *Purgatorio* is also one of hopelessness into hopefulness. Dante the Poet is reaching out to his audience, encouraging them to find the little sliver of hope that shines through the fog. For a reader with a strengthening connection to the protagonist, this could be a life-changing moment: “the sphere of the sun shines weakly through / them, / and your imagination will easily come to see how I first saw the sun again...” Here, Dante is relating his journey out of the immense darkness that an MDE perpetuates. Dante is communicating to readers that, despite how endless and directionless it may seem, the sunlight will still shine through once more—and that the happiness will return.

Similarly, after Dante the Poet rekindles the flame of hope within readers, Dante the Pilgrim experiences an earthquake on the mountain of Purgatory. In Canto 21, Dante makes the argument that, as an individual, we oversee our own healing—to a certain extent:

Here the mountain trembles when some soul  
feels itself cleansed, so that it rises up or starts to  
climb, and that cry seconds it.  
  
We know that we are cleansed when the will  
itself surprises the soul with the freedom to change  
convents, and the soul rejoices to will it (21.58-63).

In his Purgatory, the souls are tasked with their self-cleansing, the self-riddance of the sin that earned their spot on one of the terraces. Comparing the souls' struggle with sin to the readers' struggle with a Major Depression Episode could be the direct allegorical connection within Dante's argument: much like the souls must see to their own eventual happiness, so must you, Reader.

Though the reader may be suffering from an MDE and seeking the help of a guide (a social worker, clinician, educator, etc.), the reader and sufferer is still responsible for their own healing. All of the help in the world can be offered and an unlimited amount of resources can be dedicated to the rehabilitation of the reader, but without the reader's direct effort and personal responsibility throughout the healing process, all efforts will prove futile. Dante solidifies this claim by having the souls remain within their respective terrace in Purgatory if they choose not to see to their own self-cleansing. Likewise, if a sufferer of an MDE remains complacent, their mental illness will only worsen. They will be stuck in a perpetual state—the half-way point between suffering and happiness.

Nearing the end of the bibliotherapeutic process is when participants would become fully in charge of themselves—leaving their guide behind. In *Canto 27 of Purgatorio*, it's stated:

Virgil fixed his eyes on me  
 and said: "The temporal fire and the eternal  
 have you seen, my son, and you have come to a  
 place where I by myself discern no further.  
 I have drawn you here with wit and with art;  
 your own pleasure now take as leader: you are  
 beyond the steep ways, beyond the narrow.  
 See the sun that shines on your brow, see the  
 grasses, the flowers, and the bushes that here the  
 earth brings forth of itself alone...  
 ...No longer await any word or sign from me: free,  
 upright, and whole is your will, and it would be a  
 fault not to act according to its intent.

Therefore you over yourself I crown and mitre" (27.126-142).

As Vergil claims to have led Dante the Pilgrim to the uppermost step of Purgatory "with wit and with art," Dante the Poet has done the same for readers—a simultaneous experience of catharsis for protagonist, author, and reader. It is at this point that this installment's theme of self-responsibility is most solidified.

The parallel between the poem's allegory and the bibliotherapeutic benefit becomes clear: it is at this point that the reader becomes the sole agent responsible for their destiny—that

the art and wit of the guide has prepared them for the road that lies ahead. The reader has now become the lord that is responsible for cultivating their own kingdom.

## Chapter 6

***Paradiso and the Lightness of Being Healed***

“I see well how the eternal Light already / shines within your intellect, the Light that, when /  
seen, alone and always kindles love...”

-Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*

Out of the infernal hellscape of pain, up the steep mountain of personal development, and into the spheres of personal success and happiness is where the reader will find themselves at the beginning of *Paradiso*. Dante’s Paradise is created in stark contrast to Dante’s Hell. From the beginning of *Paradiso*, in Canto 1, Dante the Poet is attempting to relate the treasures found within Paradise to readers:

The glory of Him who moves all things  
penetrates through the universe and shines  
forth in one place more and less elsewhere.  
In the heaven that receives most of his light  
have I been, and I have seen things that  
one who comes down from there cannot  
remember and cannot utter,  
for as it draws near to its desire, our intellect goes  
so deep that the memory cannot follow it.  
Nevertheless, as much of the holy kingdom  
as I was able to treasure up in my mind will  
now become the matter of my song (1.1-12).

Beginning the installment of *Paradiso* with this directly sets up the entirety of the installment's theme: from here on out, Dante the Poet will be recounting to readers the beautiful, opulent imagery he experienced within Paradise.

Not only has Dante the Poet established the breathtaking imagery of Paradise, he has created the ultimate form of community—a form greater than that found within Purgatory. In *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman*, it is stated: “Discussions of joint attention tend to focus on two observers contemplating the same object, a subject-object relationship that needs to be surpassed for our discussion of Dante. But to begin here, the emphasis is on the personal presence of both observers, and the shared availability of each to the co-observer, so that at any moment, one of the co-observers can address the other in the second person, as ‘you,’ and the reference would be immediately clear. This is a basic sort of ‘mind-reading’” (Webb 202). Continuing on, Webb states: “Dante’s *Paradiso* urges us to imagine a place in which everyone, except for Dante himself, has the possibility to enter into every other mind” (202).

This is a complete shift from the distinct isolationist theme—created and supported by an individualistic contrapasso assigned to each soul in Hell—into a sense of the ultimate community: that with fluidity between the minds of all involved within it.

By this point, the reader's connection to the protagonist will be more solid than ever—having traveled through an infernal landscape and upside a mountain. So, because of this, identification and projection will be that much easier for readers to encounter. And, as this installment will be the most important of the epic for readers to internalize, bibliotherapeutic success rates may be strong.

While this poem is no doubt associated with religious contexts and contains religious imagery, the bibliotherapeutic benefits can still be reaped entirely disconnected from the

religious aspects. Though Dante attributes the presence and creation of light to “Him,” the Lord, people identifying with more secular belief systems—or other religious affiliations—may omit Dante’s association of light and divinity. The allegorical connection can still stand: the darkness of Hell, the slivers of light and upward climb of Purgatory, and the full-blown treasure and serenity of Paradise. Following this through the bibliotherapeutic lens would coincide with the argument made in the introduction: a reader suffering from a Major Depression Episode identifies and projects with the darkness experienced by the protagonist in the *Inferno*, works through their issues therapeutically and accepts sole responsibility like the souls in *Purgatorio*, and transcends the mental illness and experiences the lightness of happiness and love like Dante the Pilgrim does in *Paradiso*—and all of which can happen without a single religious affiliation.

## Chapter 7

**A Successful Bibliotherapeutic Approach**

If applied correctly, the bibliotherapeutic process could be the process that saves someone's life. Major Depression Episodes have the potential to be deadly—to be life-ending. Many people feel that there are no ways out... none apart from suicide. They feel worthless, hopeless, and silenced. Successfully implementing and utilizing bibliotherapy can drastically improve an individual's quality of life—and that's something that could be added to the educator's arsenal.

As has been explored in this thesis, Dante the Pilgrim begins his literary journey in a place much like the place people suffering from the beginning stages of an MDE find themselves in. The true path seems lost in darkness and the iron grip of fear has taken hold. Not only is this the beginning of the literary journey and a direct comparison to the beginning stages of depression, this also serves as a strong starting point for the beginning of bibliotherapy. Through identification and projection, readers can recognize the allegorical resemblance and connect deeper with the literature's protagonist. It's possible that, for the first time in their lives, readers may feel understood. The conflict of the protagonist deeply connects with the conflict of the reader. Though their identities are different, they are simultaneously sharing a similar experience.

Like any good work of literature, a plethora of emotions are represented within Dante's *Divine Comedy*. An essential element of bibliotherapy being catharsis and abreaction, this could deepen the reader's bond with the protagonist and the journey he is undertaking and further facilitate the emotional release the process requires. Upon the success of catharsis, readers may finally feel the heavy weight of the MDE lifting—a feeling of reconnection with society and

community, much like Dante the Pilgrim experiences as his journey transitions from infernal  
hellscape to Purgatory, and from Purgatory to Paradise.

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