

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The New Life (1292-1294)

Dante Alighieri

OVERVIEW

Dante composed the *New Life* (*Vita Nuova*) between 1292 and 1294. A combination of prose and poetry, the book consists of forty-two chapters and serves as a retrospective view of the author's life. Dante recounts significant moments from his past and contextualizes his poetry within these moments, providing both literary and autobiographical insight into his works. The book begins with Dante's introduction to Beatrice Portinari in childhood, which establishes her as the muse for his subsequent ruminations on the nature of Love. The *New Life* concludes shortly after Beatrice's death, with Dante's declaration that he will no longer write poetry about her: instead, he will endeavor to honor her in a greater work.

LITERARY / HISTORICAL NOTES

Dante, in a departure from his contemporaries, chose to write the *New Life* in the vernacular dialect of Florence, that is, in Italian, rather than Latin. For this reason, he is considered the father of Italian language. Along with poets Petrarch (1304-1374) and Boccaccio (1313-1375), Dante (1265-1321) is one of the 'three crowns' of Italian literature.

There are thirty-one poems in the *New Life*, introduced in chronological order, many of which invoke the personification of Love. Dante experiments with his verse, incorporating sonnets, ballads and Provençal poems. Dante's poetic style can be described as "sweet new style". This term, coined by Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, blends both romantic and divine love, describing the woman's beauty in terms of angelic figures and heavenly paradise.

Dante's closing remarks in Chapter 42 hint at the prominent role Beatrice will play in his epic, *The Divine Comedy*, where she serves as the poet's intercessor and guide to heaven.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Dante	The author and poet of the <i>New Life</i>
Beatrice	The muse and subject of the poems

STORY

First Meeting In the opening to the *New Life*, Dante describes a "book of memory" in his mind and a section of it that contains the experiences of his "new life." It is this section of his memory that he intends to revisit in this book, beginning with his first experience of Love when, at the age of nine, he sees the young and beautiful Beatrice.

Vision Nine years later, Beatrice looks at him and greets him on the street, an encounter that intoxicates him and inspires a vision. In this vision, a man appears to Dante, carrying a sleeping Beatrice in his arms and the poet's heart in one hand. Beatrice wakes up and eats the heart, and shortly afterwards, the man begins to weep, enfolding Beatrice in his arms, and departs with her towards heaven. This vision inspires one of Dante's sonnets, which explains that the male figure from the vision is the personification of Love. In this sonnet, Dante requests help from his audience to interpret what he saw. Following his vision, Dante describes a growing obsession with Beatrice which makes him physically ill.

Mistaken Gaze Dante describes an incident in church, where another woman mistakes his gazing at Beatrice to be directed at her. To mask his feelings for Beatrice, he encourages the misunderstanding and writes a series of poems for this unnamed woman. Dante is troubled when the woman leaves the city, and he writes a sonnet that – on the surface – laments her departure. The truth, Dante writes, is that his heartbreak is inspired by Beatrice.

Death and Grief A young woman and friend of Beatrice dies. Knowing that she and Beatrice were close, Dante grieves for the deceased and writes two sonnets in honor of her: the first, addressed to

Love, and the second, to Death.

Rejection Dante travels away from the city of Florence, during which time scandalous rumors spread about his relationship with the unnamed woman from the church. He suspects these rumors are to blame when he encounters Beatrice upon his return and she refuses to greet him. Denied Beatrice's attention, Dante comes to realize that his happiness is dependent on her acknowledgment. Depressed by the rejection, Dante retreats from public life and experiences another vision of the Lord of Love, who urges Dante to write a poem to Beatrice, revealing the depth of his feelings for her. Inspired by this vision, the poet composes a ballad, declaring himself to be his lady's servant and expressing the hope that she will pity him.

Another Embarrassment Dante next encounters Beatrice at a wedding which he attends with a friend. Overcome by Love at the sight of her, he grows faint and leans against a nearby painting to recover. His strange behavior is noticed and mocked by Beatrice's companions, which embarrasses Dante. After the wedding, he writes another sonnet for Beatrice, explaining the reason behind his swooning. Dante wrestles with this question: considering how much he suffers from unrequited love, why does he continue to seek Beatrice out? Dante writes two sonnets in defense of his actions, concluding that Love has a painful hold on him.

What is Love? Dante decides, following a brief discussion with a group of ladies, to forego the melancholy poetry and focus on the bliss of loving Beatrice. He composes a poem in which he praises her virtue and encourages those worthy to seek her out. Later, Dante responds to a query from a friend: what is his definition of love? In two sonnets, Dante describes love as a potential force, or power, that resides in the heart and comes to life in response to the gaze of Beatrice.

Beatrice's Loss Dante reveals that Beatrice's father has passed away. He eavesdrops on the ladies who have visited her, and in overhearing how grief-stricken she is, he writes two more sonnets. One describes the poet's questions and concern for Beatrice's wellbeing, and the second consists of responses to those questions which he overheard while eavesdropping on the ladies who comforted her.

Vision of Death Dante suffers from a severe illness that leaves him bedbound for nine days. During this time, he contemplates mortality, his own and Beatrice's. The thought of Beatrice dying causes him to physically convulse and to imagine a world in which the sky darkens, birds fall and earthquakes rumble. In his imagination, angels gather singing praises and Dante understands the Beatrice is dead. As he weeps, Dante is awoken from his vivid dream by the concerned voice of a young lady (presumably a close female relative) at his bedside.

Beatrice's Power After Dante recovers from his illness, he reflects on the positive reception Beatrice elicits when she walks through the city: he composes two sonnets, which describe the effect of her virtue on others. She inspires happiness and goodness. He later writes a verse which addresses – specifically – how Beatrice influences him.

Beatrice's Death Dante is in the midst of another verse when he receives news that Beatrice has died. He describes the circumstances of her death, the impact it had on the city, and his own grief. In yet another poem, he reflects not only on his anguish but on Beatrice's ascension to heaven. Following the publication of his poem, Dante is approached by a friend to write a sonnet in honor of a young lady who has died (he suspects, though she is unnamed, the lady is Beatrice) and decides to write two poems in honor of his friend's loss. The close relationship between this friend and Beatrice suggests he may be her brother.

Split Loyalties One year after Beatrice's death, Dante composes an anniversary poem in honor of her. He also describes periodic (unspoken) encounters with a beautiful and compassionate lady who he sees standing at a window. The lady inspires him to compose additional poems in honor of Love. This is also a source of conflict for Dante, who feels guilty for finding comfort in this new lady. He feels an obligation to remain loyal to Beatrice after death. His divided thoughts are represented in his poetry, until he vividly recalls their first meeting as children. This memory causes him to renew his dedication to Beatrice.

Conclusions Dante describes writing several more sonnets, some in response to the arrival of pilgrims in Florence and others at the request of noble ladies. The book concludes with Dante's decision not to write further poetry about Beatrice until he can devise a more worthy way to honor her.

THEMES

Human Love: Love is the central theme of the *New Life* and it manifests throughout this work as both a personification (Love) and a human emotion (love). The title itself refers to Dante's "new life" which begins the day he sees – and falls in love with – Beatrice. He describes the blissful highs and the melancholic lows of harboring this devotion for her, including the physiological effects love has on the body: from frailty to swooning and weeping. Each of the thirty-one poems included in the book reflects some facet of the author's love for Beatrice: he refers to himself as her servant and slave, lauds her beauty, describes her virtue, pleads for her compassion, laments his heartache, and grieves for her death. Love consumes the poet, and in this way it is described as both ecstatic and dangerous: his happiness, health and well-being are intertwined with love of Beatrice.

Divine Love: To further illustrate the power of Love, Dante personifies it as a young and attractive nobleman who appears to him in visions, often to give him advice on the subject of Beatrice, and throughout his poetry. Dante often invokes Love in a way that is not dissimilar from God, issuing prayers and pleading for guidance from this figure. He even refers to Beatrice as an angel of Love. In the *New Life*, Dante gives voice to four competing ideas about Love, among which is the push-pull of good and evil: on one hand, Love is good because it diverts the mind from evil thoughts but on the other hand, Love is evil because the more intensely one loves, the more one suffers. Within the *New Life*, Dante vacillates between good and evil. His love for Beatrice inspires him creatively and spiritually, but it is also the source of pain.

Life and Death: As the title of the book suggests, the cycle of life and death is also a theme of Dante's poetry. He is "reborn" once he experiences love for the first time, and the power of love is illustrated through its influence on the living and its persistence after death. Dante finds purpose and meaning in his "new life" through his love of Beatrice, revealing in his poetry how love can impact one's quality of life (i.e., health and happiness). As he struggles through depressive periods and illness, Dante contemplates mortality. He references several deaths in the *New Life*: the deaths of Beatrice's father and companion, his own eventual death, and the death of Beatrice herself. Each death is an opportunity – in poetry – for Dante to ruminate on the relationship of love and grief. It is through his love of Beatrice that Dante grieves for the people she has lost, and he remains committed to her memory years after she has passed. The final chapters of the *New Life* explore life after the death of a loved one, the difficulty of moving on, and the importance of memory.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Dante

Character: Dante is the lovelorn subject of the autobiographical prose in the *New Life*, as well as the author of its poetry. He divides his life into two parts: the first forgettable eight years before he met Beatrice and the "new life" that follows his initial encounter with her. His devotion borders on – at times – unhealthy obsession, as it impacts his physical and emotional health. He idealizes her as more than human and comes to see other women only in relation to her, exploiting their lives (and deaths) to enhance the poetry he writes about her.

Illustrative Moments:

Devoted: Dante is devoted to Beatrice during her lifetime and after death. This devotion is reflected in his selection of poems. Early in the *New Life*, he introduces a young woman whom he uses to mask his love for Beatrice and states that while he wrote her "certain trifles," he will not include those verses in this book – except in cases where Beatrice is also referenced. Dante repeatedly reaffirms his devotion to Beatrice despite rumors and poems that link him to other women. Following Beatrice's death, Dante publishes poetry in remembrance of her. A year later, when he meets the compassionate, gracious lady at the window, he is torn between his attachment to this new lady and his posthumous loyalty to Beatrice. In his poetry, Dante refers to this conflict as a form of infidelity which resolves itself after he experiences a vivid memory of the first day he met Beatrice. Filled with shame that his gaze has wandered, Dante rededicates his heart to Beatrice in another poem. The final lines of the book emphasize his devotion: he is searching for more worthy way to commemorate her and writes, "I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman."

Obsessive: Dante's devotion to Beatrice becomes unhealthy at various points throughout the *New Life*. He describes being undone by Love: he is so absorbed in his thoughts of Beatrice that his physical body suffers; he becomes noticeably frail and weak, drawing the attention of those around

him. When Beatrice neglects to look at him as a result of scandalous rumors circulating, Dante describes his happiness as hinged on her gaze. Without it, he is grief-stricken and reduced to tears. He must make amends to Beatrice in his verse. Later, Dante recounts an embarrassing experience at a wedding: he sees Beatrice in the company of other ladies, and is so struck by her that he can no longer stand upright. He is tormented by the thought that she is mocking him for this strange behavior and writes a sonnet in defense of himself, desperate to clarify what happened. In his poetry, he describes the inability to restrain himself from seeking her out, revealing a compulsive need to see her.

Religious: Dante's Christian faith permeates the *New Life*. At times, his poetry references biblical figures (such as the prophet Jeremiah), but most of the religious imagery is focused on the virtuous and beautiful Beatrice. At one point, Dante refers to her presence in Florence as an intervention by God who "placed" her there. She is described throughout the book in angelic and miraculous terms, both for her beauty and for her character. In contemplating the brevity of life during his prolonged sickness, Dante imagines the ascension of Beatrice to heaven. Following her death, Dante revisits this in his poetry, reflecting on the Christian imagery of Beatrice dwelling among angels as a consolation for those she left behind.

Beatrice

Character: Beatrice is first introduced at the age of ten, and Dante's initial encounter with her in childhood is the start of his "new life." He falls in love with her the first time he sees her, and his love for her informs this collection of poetry. He describes her in religious terms as a divine and virtuous figure who is ultimately out of his reach. Her virtue and goodness afford her great power to influence the world around her, including Dante. His health and happiness are explicitly linked to her good favor throughout the *New Life*.

Illustrative Moments:

Divine: In the second chapter of the *New Life*, Dante cites a quotation from the Greek poet Homer: "She did not seem to be the daughter of any ordinary man, but rather of a god." Her beauty is described in that same chapter as so pure that Dante's appreciation for it is tempered by reason; by this, he means that he does not think of her in base, or lustful, terms. Beatrice's perfect virtue, as discussed below, is a characteristic of her connection to the divine. Dante writes, at one point, that when she walks down the street, others remark that she is not a woman, but a miracle, an angel in human form. Throughout the *New Life*, she is linked to angels and the biblical imagery manifests strongly during Dante's vision of her death. In his vision, the world grows dark, the ground shakes, and angels start to sing. These details are similar to the biblical accounts of Jesus Christ rising from the dead. In addition to explicit comparisons to angels, Dante invokes this familiar Christian imagery to describe Beatrice.

Virtuous: Dante refers to Beatrice as the queen of virtue throughout the *New Life*. He describes an incident in which his reputation suffers as a result of a scandalous affiliation with a young woman. The gossip surrounding their relationship is, he believes, the reason why Beatrice will not acknowledge him when he returns to Florence: she could be tainted by association. Heartsick at this rejection, Dante writes poetry to assure her of his love. The preservation of her virtue and reputation is a central concern of his, not only in the pains he takes to protect Beatrice's identity by not naming her in his poems but also in the content of his verse. His poetry never crosses into sexual or physical descriptions of love. This reflects his view of Beatrice as an ideal woman who exists beyond flesh. In one sonnet, he says that her virtue is so palpable that it impacts everyone she encounters, improving their dispositions.

Unattainable: Beatrice's virtue and beauty elevate her above the poet, which is why so many of their encounters consist of him gazing at her with no direct communication. There is no evidence in this book that Beatrice and Dante ever exchanged a word; it is the absence of her voice in the *New Life* that emphasizes how unattainable she is. When he describes the incident where she ignores him, for example, Dante reveals what he *suspects* has changed her opinion of him, but there is no way to confirm whether she has heard the rumors of his dalliance with another woman. It is clear that Dante loves Beatrice from afar, as reflected in his one-sided observations of her in church, on the streets of Florence, and at a wedding. He idealizes her to such an extent that she becomes more than human, an angelic figure. The distance – or lack of interaction – between them is necessary to preserve that idealization.



Dante and Beatrice (1883, Henry Holiday)

This painting is based on the *New Life* and depicts the scene in which Beatrice (dressed in white and gold) refuses to acknowledge Dante, due to the scandalous rumors she has heard about him. The scene takes place on the Santa Trinita Bridge in Florence.