

English 10
Letter to Cangrande della Scala

Please read the excerpt of the letter below and mark it up to help yourself understand its ideas. On Monday we will in our Zoom class treat a passage from *Purgatorio* in light of these principles. Then, the last *Purgatorio* assignment will be to apply these principles to a Canto—not the one you studied for your presentation—to explore the ideas they elicit.

Here is Dante, writing to his friend and host in Verona, Cangrande della Scala:

The meaning of this work is not simple. . . for we obtain one meaning from the letter of it and another from that which the letter signifies; and the first is called the literal, but the other allegorical or mystical. And to make this matter of treatment clearer, it may be studied in the verse: “When Israel came out of Egypt and the House of Jacob from among a strange people, Judah was his sanctuary and Israel his dominion.” For if we regard the letter alone, what is set before us is the exodus of the Children of Israel from Egypt in the days of Moses; if the allegory, our redemption wrought by Christ; if the moral sense, we are shown the conversion of the soul from the grief and wretchedness of sin to the state of grace; if the anagogical, we are shown the departure of the holy soul from the thralldom of this corruption to the liberty of eternal glory. And although these mystical meanings are called by various names, they may all be called in general allegorical, since they differ from the literal and historical. The subject of the whole work, then, taken merely in the literal sense is “the state of the soul after death straightforwardly affirmed,” for the development of the whole work hinges on and about that. But if, indeed, the work is taken allegorically, its subject is: “Man, as by good or ill deserts, in the exercise of his free choice, he becomes liable to rewarding or punishing Justice.”

So, we can read any canto in four ways:

- Literal**: “This is that sense which does not go beyond the strict limits of the letter” (What it is)
- Allegorical**: “This is disguised under the cloak of such stories, and is truth hidden under a beautiful fiction.” (What the text means)
- Moral**: “This sense is that for which teachers ought as they go through writings intently to watch for their own profit and that of their hearers.” (What lessons we can get out of it)
- Anagogical**: “This occurs when a writing is spiritually expounded which even in the literal sense by the things signified likewise gives intimation of higher matters belonging to the eternal glory.” (What we can learn in a spiritual sense)

Directions on the next page—>

Directions for assignment due midnight Friday, May 1.

Write a paper in four sections in which you provide the four different readings of your passage: literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Your introduction should indicate which passage you have chosen and why. The thesis need only argue that the passage is complex, rich, and worthwhile in the ways you identify.

Each titled section may be one or more paragraphs in which you set forth the given reading of the canto. The first sentence of each section should be a topic sentence that sets forth the main idea of the section. In each section, you are arguing for the primacy of your reading, that is, that your reading is the one most clearly indicated by the passage.

As always in academic writing for English class, you may use “I” to describe your process. (E.g., “While some might consider this idea as allegorical, I place it in the moral category because the content of the symbols suggests moral lessons so strongly.”)

You must include short, frequent quotations, cited correctly, in each section of your paper.

Your conclusion should bring all the readings together in a synthesis paragraph that should balance in length with the introduction.

As always, you are not to use commercial summaries or study guides at all on any work in English 10. In our work on *Purgatory*, you are welcome, as always, to use other translations, Esolen’s notes, other translators’ notes, or the material from Columbia or Leeds.