Guided by the Light: the Influence of Dante upon Michelangelo

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Guided by the Light: the Influence of Dante upon Michelangelo

The word “light” evokes both a literal and metaphorical translation. Light can be a shining brightness from a light source, the shade of a figure in a drawing or painting, or an element representing an idea which must be contemplated rather than seen in order to comprehend.\(^1\) I propose that within the artwork and poetry of Michelangelo Buonarroti, as well as within the poetry of Dante Alighieri, light is not only used for pictorial and lyrical purposes but is often a metaphor representing righteousness. Light also represents the journey of man to understand the supreme art of God.\(^2\) During the medieval period, there was a renewed interest in the Pseudo-Dionysius theology of a mystic whose belief was that God is an “incomprehensible and inaccessible light.”\(^3\) While the critics of both Dante and Michelangelo have studied the influence of Dante upon Michelangelo’s works, little research has been conducted on how the Florentine sculptor, painter and poet was influenced by the use of light found in the *Divine Comedy*.\(^4\)

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\(^4\) For reference to the influence of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, see Paul Barolsky “The Visionary Art of Michelangelo in the Light of Dante.” *Dante Studies*. 114 (1996). In this work, Barolsky discusses the general influence of the *Divine Comedy* but does not specifically refer to the use of light in specific works. Also see Kemp, Martin, “In the Light of Dante: Meditations on Natural Light and Divine Light in Piero della Francesca, Raphael and Michelangelo.” *Ars naturam advuvans. Festschrift für Matthias Winner.* Eds. V. von Flemming and S. Schüze,
Dante’s journey and his search for righteousness pertain to not only the spiritual, but also Biblical scripture. According to Paul in Acts, “Whereupon as I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests, at midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them that journeyed with me,” the morality of the journey seeming to be confirmed by the appearance of light within scripture.⁵ Through the *Divine Comedy*, Dante the Pilgrim is on a journey, beginning in the darkness of Hell and ending in the light of Heaven⁶. The brightness of God expresses His presence and support, as well as the good morality of a situation, which is supported by the Biblical journey of Paul previously mentioned from the Book of Acts.

While the institution of a religion, such as the Catholic Church, may be corrupted by man, spirituality is a direct relationship with God that may not be tarnished. By understanding the distinction between religious clerical power, which may be corrupted by the darkness of evil, and the true divine righteousness symbolized by light, I will analyze both poetry and visual imagery. For instance, in the poetry of the *Divine Comedy*, Dante gives examples of particular members of the clergy, such as Pope Nicholas III in *Inferno* 19, who he believes moved away from the light of God by committing the sinful act of simony. Simony is defined as bribery within the Church in order to obtain a high clerical position or purchase sacraments. It is named after Simon Magus, a man who attempted to use money to purchase power within the early Church. In conferring with the Apostles in Acts, Simon Magus “offered them money, saying,

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⁵ Acts 26:12-13 ASV.

⁶ Barolsky, 1.
Give me also this power, that on whomsoever I lay my hands, he may receive the Holy Spirit.”

Pope Nicholas III is also found guilty of this sinful act in the Divine Comedy and because of this is forced to spend eternity face downwards in a hole of darkness, feet engulfed in flames. The key images I will analyze are those in the Sistine Chapel Last Judgment (1535-41) and Michelangelo’s sculpture the Rondanini Pietà (1550-1564), as well as passages from the Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri (1308-1321), in particular Paradise and Inferno. Examples from Dante’s poetry, as well as contemporary and past scholarship, I will show how Dante influenced Michelangelo, with regard to the meaning and depiction of light.

To begin, I will demonstrate the essential connection between Dante (1264-1321) and Michelangelo (1475-1564). Dante and Michelangelo are alike because both men were Catholic Florentines during important though different artistic and literary movements. The Catholic tradition and its view of light likely influenced the way in which these men depicted light within their artwork. Psalm 37 links the idea of righteousness and light, stating, “And he will make thy righteousness to go forth as the light, And thy justice as the noon-day.” Michelangelo was likely influenced by Biblical verses in his works. Giorgio Vasari, one of the artist’s contemporary biographers, claimed that he “delighted in scripture,” and also confirmed the influence of Dante’s poetry in his works. Michelangelo is also described as “a clear witness for Truth; a humble servant of the Eternal One whose nature is light.” The Eternal One is likely

7 Acts 8: 18-19 ASV.
8 Psalm 37: 6 ASV.
representative of God and light being His righteous nature. Dante too mentions “the Eternal Light” of God in *Paradise* as something that all hope to set their eyes upon (*Paradise* 33. 124).

Dante lived during the late Middle Ages, a time when the Roman Catholic Church maintained immense power within the nations which would one day become Italy, many of the people members of the Church. Yet because Italy was divided into communes and states, a common spoken language did not exist but rather a collection of dialects, most of which are still used today.¹¹ Michelangelo lived during the Renaissance (about 200 years after Dante), yet it is clear that Michelangelo was familiar with Dante’s poetry. It is documented that when he was a young man, Michelangelo often read Petrarch, Dante, or Boccaccio in the evening to further his studies and talent, though his reading of Dante is thought to have been the most intensive.¹²

In addition to this, Michelangelo also wrote a poem titled “Dante.” This poem not only confirms Michelangelo’s knowledge of Dante’s poetry, but also suggests his admiration for Dante’s work, as he states, “Ne’er walked the earth a greater man than he.”¹³ Michelangelo also wrote two other sonnets about Dante in which he indicates his respect for him. *Sonnet 248* and *Sonnet 250* refer to Dante himself as light and splendor, stating, “He came down from heaven, and in his mortal body...,”¹⁴ as well as “all that should be said of him cannot be said/ for too brightly did his splendor burn for our blind eyes.”¹⁵ These verses not only hint at the righteous qualities of Dante, but also his spiritual awareness. The blind eyes referenced in the verse are


¹⁴ Ibid, sonnet 248, 201.

¹⁵ Ibid, sonnet 250, 203.
likely to emphasize the lack of spiritual knowledge and understanding of others in relation to
Dante because blindness during this period was associated with unawareness and sin.¹⁶ This
blindness is due to our inclination to try to solve problems based upon our own thoughts rather
than looking to God for answers, for “all of us sinners, to varying degrees, are blind to this
metaphysics of creation and tend to see the world from the standpoint of the self-elevating
ego.”¹⁷ Finally, Donato Giano tti, Michelangelo’s Roman associate, forged another connection
between the two great artists by praising the master Michelangelo as a great dantista.¹⁸ This
statement suggests that the artist at the very least was greatly familiar with the works of Dante, as
well as inspired by them.

Dante inspired some of Michelangelo’s artwork as well as his poetry. In his drawings of a
Pietà (Fig.1) for his close friend Vittoria Colonna, the cross bears an inscription taken from
Paradise 29 which reads, “they devote no thought to how much blood/ it costs” ( Paradise 29:
91-92).¹⁹ By inscribing Dante’s verses onto the cross, Michelangelo reminds the viewer of
Christ’s ultimate sacrifice and how man will only be able to see the light with an understanding
of Christ’s Passion, as well as the realization that His death is the redeeming grace for the souls
of sinful men and women. His unfinished Sonnet 302 also supports the idea that only through
consideration of the passion does man have the ability to be saved. He declares, “My dear Lord,
you who alone clothe and strip souls/ and with your blood purify and heal them,” suggesting that

¹⁶ Camille, 124.
¹⁸ Gianotti Donato, De’giorni che Dante consumò nel cercare, l’Inferno e ’l Purgatorio. Firenze: Nella Tipografia
Galileiana, 1859. This work of literature is in form of dialogues and one of the interlocutors is Michelangelo, who
often cites Dante. Though it is unlikely that this is verbatim, we can suppose that he is expressing Michelangelo’s
views on Dante. See Barolsky, 171.
the sacrificial death of Christ allows the forgiveness of man’s constant descent into the darkness.\textsuperscript{20} The absence of light seems to be a type of divine justice for both Michelangelo and Dante, the prime example being the total darkness of the \textit{Inferno}. The absence of God’s light causes a yearning for the shades which can never be fulfilled. Some souls like Dante’s first guide Virgil are condemned because they lived before the time of Christianity. Because of this, he laments, “we now are lost and punished just with this: / we have no hope and yet we live in longing,” the shades always yearning for the light of God but knowing they will never be able to truly experience it (\textit{Inferno} 4: 41-42).

While the poem “Dante” establishes that Michelangelo respected Dante and was familiar with his poetry, the fresco representing the \textit{Last Judgment} indicates how the images evoked by Dante’s poetry greatly influenced Michelangelo, in particular the formerly mentioned \textit{Inferno} and \textit{Paradise}. The viewer recognizes Dante’s influence in the image of Christ in the \textit{Last Judgment} as the \textit{sol iustitiae}.\textsuperscript{21} Paul Barolsky supports this conclusion, arguing that Michelangelo shared a journey similar to that of Dante the Pilgrim in the \textit{Divine Comedy}.\textsuperscript{22} Light is crucial in regards to this journey because in order for it to be successful, these artists must do as the Pilgrim did, discarding their past failures and the darkness within, which represents evil and sin. Then they must move towards flawlessness, which is synonymous to the light and goodness of God.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} Ryan, sonnet 302, 243.

\textsuperscript{21} Barolsky, 1. Here Barolsky is referencing a hymn which identifies Christ as the \textit{sol iustitiae}, or the sun of righteousness.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 1-2.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 2.
The *Rondanini Pietà* reflects this journey and is particularly important because it is the last piece Michelangelo worked on before his death, a sculpture he created for personal, spiritual reasons rather than for a patron (Fig. 2).24 Vastly different from some of the smooth, polished surfaces of his previously completed sculptures, such as his first *Pietà* (1498-1499), Michelangelo shows how the process or journey towards perfection is what is crucial, not necessarily the end product. The sculpture represents Christ coming out of Mary’s womb, the weight of human sin upon them.25 Michelangelo, like Dante, believed that Mary is the womb of the church. Specifically, in *Paradise 31* we see how Dante represents Mary as a rose: “in the shape of [a] white Rose, the holy/legion was shown to me- the host that Christ/with His own blood, had taken as His bride,” and subsequently he refers to the Virgin Mary as, “the Queen of Heaven,” that “the light of God” shines upon in splendor (*Paradise* 33.1, 22).

The *Rondanini Pietà* as a representation of Michelangelo’s final journey of faith is furthermore supported by verses seen in his late poetry of meditation and prayer and is comparable to Dante the Pilgrim’s journey in the *Divine Comedy*.26 Michelangelo recognized his mortality in relation to the light of God, stating, “One day this body of mine will fall like the lamp, and the light of my life will be spent.”27 The shadows cast by this sculpture on the walls of Castello Sforzesco, where it now resides, would have been similar to those it initially cast in the studio of the artist, where it was recovered after his death.28 These shadows were a purposeful invention of the artist, using light to comment upon the struggle associated with the journey. Just

24 Hughes, 313.
25 Ibid., 314.
26 See his poem “My life’s journey has finally arrived, after a stormy sea”, Ryan, sonnet 285.
27 Vasari, 745.
28 Hughes, 312-314.
as Dante the Pilgrim at the beginning of his journey found himself “within a shadowed forest/ for
[he] had lost the path that does not stray,” Michelangelo too in life had lost the path of
righteousness, the shadows of earth casting fear and doubt about his ability for redemption
(Inferno 1. 2-3). This struggle occurred during the time in which he joined the reform group the
spirituali (founded in 1510). The spirituali were a spiritual reform group which focused upon the
individual’s relationship with God, gaining inspiration from older Catholic texts as well as the
Protestant Reformation. Vittoria Colonna introduced Michelangelo to this spiritual reform
group decades before he began work on the Rondanini Pietà. While the official position of the
Catholic Church was that redemption could be reached through works of charity in addition to
faith, and religious practices, this group believed that faith alone led to salvation. This viewpoint
was dangerously close to what the Protestants believed, which would not have boded well for
Michelangelo if made public because it would likely affect the patronage he often received from
the Catholic Church, as well as his status as a Catholic.

I propose that the shadow to the left of these figures represents the spiritually lost
Michelangelo, for those on the left of God are often seen as sinners who are not on the path to
redemption. However, those to the right of Christ are often thought to be the ones who will be
saved due to the surrendering of their egos and understanding that only through Christ’s grace
may they be redeemed. An example of this is seen in the Last Judgment, where Hell resides on
Christ’s left while those being raised to enter paradise are on Christ’s right. For this reason, it is
likely the shadow to the right of the Rondanini Pietà is the representation of Michelangelo at the

29 Barron, 29.
30 Balas, 51-53.
31 Ibid., 52.
32 Barron, 32-33.
end of his journey of faith, Christ’s death being the central link between the shadows of Michelangelo’s past and future. Similar to the spiritual clarity Dante receives after going to Hell and Paradise, Michelangelo also reaches a spiritual enlightenment at the end of his journey. During the medieval period when Dante wrote the *Divine Comedy*, spiritual clarity was “associated with truth and beauty” while blindness and confusion were again thought of as “sin and ignorance,” meaning that only with clarity are worshippers able to contemplate the truth about God’s righteousness, as well as understand the redeeming qualities of Christ’s Passion.  

The change in spirituality between the beginning and end of the journey of faith for Michelangelo mirrors the change one may witness in Dante the Pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy*. After his struggles in *Inferno* and *Purgatory*, Dante enters *Paradise* and is deemed worthy to experience the Trinity firsthand. Dante seems overwhelmed by the light, proclaiming “how incomplete is speech, how weak, when set/ against my thought,” (*Paradise* 33. 121-122). However, he is able to recollect that in the circle of the Trinity, “within itself and colored like itself,/ to me seemed painted with our effigy” (*Paradise* 33. 130-131). This suggests that Dante sees humanity within the divinity of the Trinity, likely identifying with the humanity of Christ. This recognition reminds Dante of the belief that man was made in the image of God and therefore has the ability to access the light through his relationship with Christ.  

Dante realizes that he is a part of the Body of Christ, and therefore a part of the light. Linking this Pietà to the Pietà drawing for Vittoria Colonna previously mentioned, it is clear that Michelangelo, like Dante, believed that only through Christ would his soul be saved.  

33 Camille, 124.  
34 Barron, 26-29.  
35 For scholarship regarding Dante’s beliefs concerning salvation see Barron, 38. For scholarship regarding the beliefs of Michelangelo, see Balas, 52-53.
The influence of the motif of light allowed Michelangelo to create images which are referred to by scholars as visionary. These images are a mixture of Pagan and Christian elements, just as in the *Divine Comedy*. During the Renaissance, it was a struggle to do this because one of the cultural effects of Paganism was that the physically beautiful was regarded with the utmost esteem. However, in the later cultures created by Christianity, worshippers were supposed to focus upon the spiritual nature of the object. Therefore, to create a composition with both features was challenging but not impossible, the most significant detail being to not allow the Pagan aspect to overshadow the more vital Christian aspects. The *Divine Comedy* is the spiritual journey of Dante the Pilgrim from the dimness of sin on earth to the total darkness of Hell, eventually moving upward to the complete light of God and Heaven. Within the darkness of Hell resides such Pagan imagery as the River Acheron, where Charon directs the boat on which he carries lost souls. Another Pagan image is that of Minos, who resides as the judge of the damned in *Inferno*. The menacing figure of Minos is depicted by Michelangelo in the *Last Judgment* is described by Dante as “dreadful...gnashing his teeth:/examining the sins of those who enter;/ he judges and assigns as his tail twines.” (*Inferno* 5. 4-7)

Michelangelo focuses on the way in which Minos declares his final judgment of the sinner, which is by wrapping his tail around himself. The number of times he wraps his tail around himself indicates the level of Hell where the condemned person must reside for the rest of eternity. The person being judged in this image is being condemned to the second level of Hell,

36 Hughes, 253.

37 Gladden, 59.

because Minos’ thick serpentine tail is encircling his body twice. The appearance of the tail is in reference to Dante’s *Inferno* which states, “as many times as Minos wraps his tail around himself, that marks the sinner’s level” (*Inferno* 5: 11-12). Michelangelo also personalized this image by choosing the face of Minos to be a portrait of the papal Master of Ceremonies, Biagio da Cesena. A serpent bites the figure’s genitals, in addition to having the ears of a donkey to show his foolish nature.  

According to Vasari, Michelangelo represented the image in this manner because of Biagio’s criticism of the nudity within the *Last Judgment*, claiming it to be a scandalous representation rather than a way in which to signify that all humanity is fully revealed before God’s light.

Charon’s image is also influenced by Dante’s verses in *Inferno*, particularly the way his eyes seem to glow and the way Charon has positioned the oar to strike any sinners who disobey him. Dante describes the figure as “the demon Charon, with his eyes like embers by signaling to them, has all embark/ his oar strikes anyone who stretches out,” (*Inferno* 3: 109-111). In spite of the muscular appearance of Charon, he seems to be aged because of his stretched and darkened skin combined with his gray hair. This image seems to match the description given by Dante, which states:

And here, advancing toward us, in a boat,

an aged man- his hair was white with years-

was shouting: “Woe to you, corrupted souls!

Forget your hope of ever seeing Heaven:

I come to lead you to the other shore,

to the eternal dark, to fire and frost.

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39 Hughes, 250-251.

40 Vasari, 694.
The promise of darkness for eternity due to the corruption of the soul indicates that the punishment for sinners is darkness, the reality being to never see God or feel His light and righteousness. Understanding and receiving this gift is a crucial aspect in the fulfillment of the soul as it ends its earthly journey of faith with God and begins the spiritual one.

These images of mythology correspond with darkness while the Christian imagery of God and angels in both Paradise and the Last Judgment are expressions of light, suggesting Christianity to be moral and just. Within the Last Judgment, Christ is portrayed as the judge of humanity, with a sort of light surrounding himself and the Virgin. The Virgin is meek in comparison to the awesome and overpowering image of Christ, who seems to be choosing where each individual deserves to go based upon the actions of his or her mortal life. The light behind Christ has been interpreted by some as a cloud from which He just ascended. This light is likely that which is described in the scripture concerning Judgment Day. While an actual throne is not displayed in the Last Judgment, the white light behind Christ and the Virgin may represent it, Revelation stating “and I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it.” This light likely represents His goodness, as well as the divinity necessary in order to pass judgment fairly. According to Matthew, He will next divide the people of the world by first “gather[ing] all the nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as the shepherd separateth the sheep from the goats; and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.”

\[\begin{align*}
\text{41 Gladden, 89.} \\
\text{42 Revelations 20: 11 ASV.} \\
\text{43 Matthew 25: 32 ASV.}
\end{align*}\]
shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."⁴⁴ Those on the left are said to be the damned, scripture declaring, “then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into the eternal fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels,” explaining that they are damned because they did not follow the example of Jesus, meaning they lost the path of righteousness and never returned to it.⁴⁵

As shown by Michelangelo here, the damned figures (including those which were inspired by Dante) are on Christ’s left in the lower region of the composition, entering into the darkness of Hell. Christ’s left hand is moving downward, potentially in an act of damnation, while His right hand seems to raise the dead into the light of Heaven and salvation. However, unlike past Last Judgment scenes such as Giotto’s, there is some ambiguity with the way in which Michelangelo portrays the hands of Christ. Though the right hand is raised up, which like past scenes may be viewed as allowing the saved to rise, it can also be viewed as casting down the justice of God on the damned. This is because the hand is angled so that it is pointed towards Hell, “as if to hurl a thunderbolt.”⁴⁶

The scholar Bernadine Barnes focuses upon the Last Judgment, one particular detail being the papal keys, a symbol seen twice within the composition. The papal keys are representative of the power of the clergy, bestowed by God first to St. Peter, the very first pope. These keys are to open or lock the gates of Heaven, meaning the clergy was given the power to

⁴⁴ Matthew 25: 33-34 ASV.
⁴⁵ Matthew 25: 41 ASV.
⁴⁶ Gladden, 89.
forgive through God’s will during the sacrament of penance.\textsuperscript{47} The papal keys are seen in two different areas of the \textit{Last Judgment}. Although Christ is shown as the ultimate judge, St. Peter is also at His lower left with the papal keys. However, St. Peter seems to be holding them out, as if in offering to Christ. This may suggest that while the scene behind the altar affirms the power of priesthood, come Judgment Day the papal keys will be returned to Christ. This return may indicate the priesthood’s awareness that Christ is the most fair judge because of His righteousness and they no longer need to stand in for God as a distributor of His forgiveness.

The second figure mentioned as a holder of the papal keys is a sinner falling into Hell. This man is also adorned with what appears to be a money bag.\textsuperscript{48} Hanging upside down in the lower corner of the fresco, the sinner seems to be being forced down into Hell (Fig. 4). Though Barnes does not offer an explanation as to the identity of this figure, it seems that the presence of the papal keys indicates his earthly position as a papal authority. Because of the presence of Minos and Charon in Hell, this figure may also be a representation inspired by Dante’s \textit{Divine Comedy}. While his identity is not speculated in the scholarship I examined, I propose him to be one of the popes Dante condemned to Hell. The figure may possibly be a representation of Pope Nicholas III, a Simonist who Dante encounters in the \textit{Divine Comedy}. The first detail which supports this is the image of the money bag, which connected with the damnation of the figure, may be an indication of bribery. Dante introduces the Simonists, in addition to describing their crimes by announcing:

\begin{quote}
O Simon Magus! O his sad disciples!

Rapacious ones, who take the things of God,
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 52.
that ought to be the brides of Righteousness,
and make them fornicate for gold and silver!

(Inferno 19: 1-4).

These verses emphasize the sins of the Simonists, which are the selling of churchly objects or bribery used in order to obtain clerical positions, which are obvious defecations of God’s virtue. The second detail which seems to support the Simonist identity of this figure is the position in which he hangs. The Simonists as Dante portrays them are placed upside-down as well in Inferno, for “out from the mouth of each hole there emerged/ a sinner’s feet and so much of his legs/ up to the thigh; the rest remained within” (Inferno 19: 22-24). Though the sinner is not in a hole and the soles of his feet are not on fire as in Inferno, he is also not yet within the Third Pouch of the Eighth Circle (where the Simonists are sent). ⁴⁹ Yet he is shown in the way Dante describes these figures to be positioned for all of eternity, the papal keys suggesting him to potentially be Pope Nicholas III, to whom Dante speaks directly to within Hell, or Pope Boniface VIII, who was not deceased at the time the Divine Comedy was written.

While Pope Nicholas III is not directly identified, his papal status is alluded to by the mention of once wearing “the mighty mantle” and being the “son of the she-bear” referencing his family name (Inferno 19. 69-70). ⁵⁰ However, it may be even more likely that the figure represents Pope Boniface VIII, for though he was still alive during the writing of the Divine Comedy, Dante had already condemned him to Hell. This condemnation is apparent by Pope Nicholas III’s exclamation directed towards Dante when he approaches him in Hell. Pope


Nicholas III addresses Dante with the statement “Are you already standing,/ already standing there, o Boniface?/ The book has lied to me by several years,” (Inferno 19: 52-54). These verses suggest that Pope Nicholas III had foreseen the arrival of his papal contemporary into Hell because of the act of Simony. Based upon the previous connections and the suggested influence of Dante upon Michelangelo’s work, the identity of this figure in relation to the Divine Comedy, though not confirmed, is a distinct possibility.

The blue background of the painting seems to be inspired by Biblical verses which describe the environment of Judgment Day. The Bible states that on Judgment Day “the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them.” 51 Though there does seem to be a part of earth in the painting, the purpose of this is likely to show the dead rising from their graves, as well as the damned going down into Hell, the mouth of Hell the central image at the bottom of the composition. The rest of the composition is groupings of figures layered throughout what appears to be all that is left of the world. Another detail which seems to be influenced from the Bible is the grouping of seven angels examining the contents of two books. The Book of Revelation states “and I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works.” 52 This passage indicates that the angels shown in the Last Judgment may be viewing the book which describes the sins of the dead, the dead identifiable by one rising directly from his or her earthly grave in the lower left corner.

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51 Revelation 20: 11 ASV.

52 Revelation 20: 11-12 ASV.
The significance of light within the *Divine Comedy* mainly evokes the idea of righteousness while the darkness represents sin. For example, in *Inferno 1*, Dante the Pilgrim begins his journey by attempting to escape from the sin of the earth and climb the mountain representing virtue but is blocked by three vicious creatures thought to represent carnal sin. While trying to flee from the she-wolf, representative of the insatiable greed of man, Dante becomes fearful and retreats back into the darkness of the world, “where the sun is speechless” (*Inferno* 1. 1-6). This image of light, or rather lack of light, transforms the sun into an object with the ability to speak, likely referring to the ability to shine.

The lack of light upon the earth suggests the absence of the righteousness of God, a theme of *Inferno* and a key concept in the argument of light. Because Dante chose to pursue the path of righteousness without help, he was unable to even begin to ascend the mountain. Direct confrontation with sin allows Dante to realize that he must change and realize the difficulties that lie ahead before he may reach God. With the help of his first guide Virgil, the poet who wrote the *Aeneid*, first they must descend into Hell and confront the darkness. Only after witnessing the results of sin and the lack of righteousness present in Hell is Dante able to realize the necessity of fully surrendering himself to God. Only by letting go of his ego and accepting the help of God is Dante able to prepare himself so that he may reach the Kingdom of Heaven and be ready to receive the light of God.

Within Dante’s *Paradise* light is a central representation or descriptor of the righteousness of God and Heaven. For example, in *Paradise 3* Dante is within one of the spheres

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53 Barron, 30-31.
54 Ibid, 30-34.
of Heaven and meets the soul of Piccarda, who was a nun while on earth. However, despite her holiness she resides in a lower sphere of Heaven because she was forced by her brother to break her sacred vows by leaving the convent and marrying. Dante questions whether she has the desire to rise to a higher sphere of Heaven in order to be in a greater light and therefore become closer to God. Piccarda explains to Dante that the light of God within each sphere satisfies those inside it, part of the peace of Heaven being that the shades do not wish for more than what they are given. Therefore, although the light of God varies within each sphere depending upon the past sins of those who reside in Paradise, all feel satisfied and at peace with the light which they have received.

Light thus far has been mentioned as a tool which both Michelangelo and Dante used for creative imagination. Michelangelo and Dante do not only use light within their works literally or metaphorically but rather as a revelation of some sort of truth. An example of this is the impact of the light or righteousness of Beatrice on the life of Dante. After meeting Beatrice at a young age, Dante’s life was changed forever. Although they did not have many interactions, Dante thought of her often, as both an image of beauty and a sort of beacon of light. Though little is known of their relationship, her existence inspired Dante’s writing positively. Upon hearing of her unexpected passing (age 24), Dante’s love and admiration for her only continued to grow; rather than wallow in her death, he began to work feverishly and with driven purpose,

56 Ibid., 23-27.
58 Gladden, 26-28.
59 Ibid, 28.
choosing to later return to her as a character in the *Divine Comedy*. In the *Divine Comedy*, Beatrice becomes the ideal guide for the Pilgrim, her character almost an embodiment of light itself because of how often Dante the Poet describes her goodness and devotion to God, as well as her Christ-like qualities.60

Dante’s love for Beatrice was not only because of her womanhood, “it was glorified womanhood, apotheosized womanhood, - the highest conception that a man can entertain of purity and truth and loveliness,” seemingly comparing Beatrice to the Virgin Mary, the prime example of a pure and pious woman.61 This comparison would also be favorable because of the increasing interest in the Virgin throughout the Middle Ages, her body “a symbol of the Church itself, for through it the tangible bond between God and humanity had been established,” suggesting that Beatrice too is a bridge between the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of humanity, which is supported by her position as Dante’s guide within Paradise.62 In addition to Dante being inspired by the light of Beatrice, Barolsky describes the influence of Dante as a sort of guiding “light” for Michelangelo, instilling within him an inspiration which led to the creation of many well-known and revered pieces of artwork.63

Light as a central theme has been the subject of numerous pieces of literature, as well as artwork. In this sense the works of Dante Alighieri have inspired Michelangelo in numerous ways. In particular, the *Divine Comedy* was a tremendous influence upon both the poetry and the artwork of Michelangelo. Both of these artists have also had other inspirations in regards to light. The Bible is a significant source, its verses seem to have been influential in the lives of

60 Ibid, 30.
61 Gladden, 25.
62 Camille, 33.
63 Barolsky, 2-5.
Michelangelo and Dante, as Catholics. Throughout *Inferno* and *Paradise*, the imagery of light and darkness are often presented as opposing forces. In the works of both Dante and Michelangelo, light represents the righteousness of God and darkness represents the absence of God and the evil of sin. These themes are represented in Michelangelo’s poetry and artwork, specifically the *Last Judgment* and the *Rondanini Pietà*. Throughout the composition of the *Last Judgment*, Michelangelo not only specifically references the *Divine Comedy* by portraying some of its characters, but he also depicts heaven and hell to represent righteousness and the darkness of evil. In the *Rondanini Pietà*, the spiritual journey of Michelangelo is comparable to the journey of Dante the Pilgrim in the *Divine Comedy*.

As previously stated, I propose that the shadows flanking the sculpture symbolize the beginning and the end of Michelangelo’s journey. This chronological journey represents the spiritual transformation of a Catholic who, like Dante, lost the path of righteousness. In order to find the right path again, Michelangelo, like Dante the Pilgrim, had to go through struggles and encounter sin and evil before he could understand the sacrifice of Christ. Michelangelo seems to have been influenced by the Pilgrim’s actions, such as surrendering himself to God. Dante the Pilgrim too was influenced by another person. Beatrice inspired Dante because of her pious nature and holiness. Upon studying some of Michelangelo’s artwork and poetry, it is apparent that he was greatly influenced by Dante, in particular his poetry in the *Divine Comedy*. One of the central aspects of the work of both of these men focuses upon the deeper meaning of light. By studying the works of these two great Italian artists, the meaning of light within artwork and literature may be better understood as a metaphor for the righteousness of God.
Figure 1, Michelangelo, *Pietà* drawing for Vittoria Colonna, 1538-44.
Figure 2, Michelangelo, *Rondanini Pietà*, 1550-1564.
Figure 3, Michelangelo, the *Last Judgment*, 1537-41.
Figure 4, Michelangelo, Detail from the *Last Judgment*, 1537-41.
Works Cited


