

The Planet of Love
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02/08/09

The evening star. *And* the morning star. Both are Venus. The ancient Egyptians and the ancient Greeks believed them to be two separate bodies so they had different names for each. In Latin, Vesper was the evening star (as in Vespers Service) and the morning star was...Lucifer.

Lucifer. There's a familiar name. Lucifer, in this context, meant, simply: Light Bearer; Day Star. Lucifer came to be synonymous with Satan in Christian thinking, however, because of a questionable interpretation of the Latin translation from the Hebrew [of a verse in Isaiah](#) that says in the King James version, "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!"

A later translation, more faithful to the Hebrew, reads: "How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn! How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!"

It may be that the Babylonians of the time, who held the Jewish people in captivity, worshipped what we know as Venus, the Day Star, in their pantheon of deities and that Isaiah was referring to this in the passage as a symbol of Babylon's eventual downfall, but there is little to suggest that he was referring to a supernatural event that purportedly occurred before time began.

But because New Testament sources pictured Satan being cast out from heaven, and this passage in Isaiah offered a similar image, Lucifer, Light Bearer, Day Star, son of Dawn became the Devil.

However, if this strange dichotomy of Lucifer may owe itself to an imaginative if unsupported leap in Scriptural interpretation, our readings point out that Venus resists easy categorization in its other attributes, too.

She glows so brightly and lovely in the night sky that virtually every culture on Earth has called her after their goddess of beauty and love: Aphrodite, Inanna, Ishtar, Astarte, Venus, [Ben Bova reminds us](#). Sometimes she is the dazzling Evening Star, brighter than anything in the sky except the Sun and Moon. Sometimes she is the beckoning Morning Star, harbinger of the new day. Always she shines like a precious jewel (Bova, Ben; [Venus](#), pg. 10).

Poul Anderson has his character [in a story](#) entitled "Sister Planet," imagine that one could sit on Venus for a hundred years in one place, watching, and never see the same thing twice. *And all that you saw would be beautiful.*

Beautiful Venus...but as beautiful as it appears, the planet itself is the most hellish place in the solar system.

The ground is hot enough to melt aluminum. The air pressure is so high it has crushed spacecraft landers as if they were flimsy cardboard cartons. The sky is perpetually covered from pole to pole with clouds of sulfuric acid. The atmosphere is a choking mixture of carbon dioxide and sulfurous gases...(Bova, Ben; [Venus](#), pg. 12).

Because of the proximity of Venus to Earth, many had hoped that this “Sister Planet” would share some of the traits of Earth, most importantly in welcoming life...but it turns out that it is not exactly hospitable, at least to life as we know it. So close...and yet so far, which should lead us to reflect, of course, on the unique qualities of this planet that allow this particular web of life to flourish. There may well be no escape hatch to the cosmos...

But my speculations took off in another direction, too. I found it interesting, and appropriate, that a planet named for the Goddess of Love and Beauty in so many cultures, should turn out to be so forbidding and dangerous. It speaks to me of the underlying truth that love can (and does) inspire explosive passions, not easily controlled by the dictates of family, religion or society. The heat of emotion that surrounds love and beauty can be dangerous; we even use the phrase that we were “burned” by love. People in love can feel that they could sit forever gazing in one another’s eyes and see new and beautiful things every moment...and they can also, if one or the other does not return the love, feel that they are experiencing the agony that one might if one were dropped on the real planet Venus, burning in the heat hot enough to melt aluminum, crushed like flimsy cardboard, choking on the very air.

It strikes me that we don’t *do love* very well in religious settings; we don’t approach it very honestly. Part of that comes from trying to articulate the many and various forms that love can take...but in general, we try to make believe that love is all sweetness and light and skip quickly over the raw emotions it can inspire. We make believe that we can easily tame it, train it, put a leash on it and direct it where we want it to go. But love *can be* dangerous and untameable.

[BBC News reported](#) that some Hindu and Muslim groups in India and Pakistan are calling for a ban on Valentine’s Day celebrations, as they find Valentine’s Day promotes immorality and encourages lustful emotions. One Hindu group, Lord Ram’s Army, recently dragged women out of a local pub to teach them a lesson about what was proper behavior. (Apparently, assaulting young women is *not* considered immoral behavior by this group). [One spokesman for the group](#) said they would “definitely attack” people who they found celebrating Valentine’s Day, while it was [reported at OneIndia](#) that they may take a softer stance this time, simply whisking the offending couples off to an immediate marriage.

Didn’t realize that Valentine’s Day was so controversial, did you? And though this particular response by religious factions is abhorrent, there *is* the recognition that love and beauty are extremely powerful in an emotional, physical and spiritual sense. Powerful; dangerous; not easily tamed or trained or even contained.

And this brings up one of the things that I love about Greek and Roman mythology; it allows for all the messiness of real life. The gods and goddesses in Greek and Roman mythology are often pictured doing very questionable things, from a moral standpoint. Now, to me, the God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam sometimes is involved in questionable activity, too, but in those religions, because God is the all-Good and all-Powerful and all-Loving, his actions must somehow be justified and accepted. If God turns Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt, there must be a good reason...but in Greek and Roman mythology, one really doesn’t have to justify what these gods and goddesses do. Far from being exemplary models for our behavior, their exploits often supply powerful examples of what *not* to do. They are unapologetically passionate, and so provide an indication, writ large, of where ordinary human passions can lead. And, being gods and goddesses, their behavior also has a great influence on our existence as we lucky humans suffer the ramifications of those unchecked passions.

The myths, in a way, explain the way things are, but they have stayed relevant long after the time that they were *believed*. They are now literary rather than literal. Picasso said, "Art is a lie that tells the truth," and I would place the great myths in that category. They speak to something within us that we know to be true...like the fact that love and beauty can be companions of danger and anguish.

And in speculating on those truths as regards our sister planet, Venus, I wonder how it takes shape for us here on planet Earth. As we affirm and promote works of love from this place, we must also understand that love can become possessive, bitter, dangerous in its passion, selfish in its single-mindedness. It is bewildering to reflect on the fact that many of the atrocities that happen in our world might, in the eyes of the perpetrators, have been inspired by love: love of a wife, a husband, a child, a parent, a family, a God, a country, a tribe, a leader, a teacher, an idea, a people, a purpose...I committed this act, they may say, from love, and we can all chime in that this is not love but it's a matter of semantics. To those people, it *felt* like love. So if we are to talk about the power of love--and we do and we will talk about the power of love here—we have a responsibility to recognize the power of love in all of its various manifestations and to articulate what it is that we mean by the love that we are promoting. We shy away from clarifying what we mean because, on the one hand, everyone knows what love is, right? And on the other hand, we know that it is just way too hard to encapsulate in a single description. Thus, everyone hears what they want to hear, the definitions keep wandering off into dark and uncharted territories, people use love to justify unjustifiable acts, and the rest of us are left with our feeble objections, saying that "*that's not really love.*"

But what is? And how, recognizing its wild and untameable nature, do we promote it in its most healthy and beneficial manifestations? We cannot find a perfect description, once and for all, but we must engage the process of clarifying and re-clarifying what we talk about when we talk about love. We cannot trap it for our own use, but we can make channels for it that will allow us to share it with the world. If we do not help to define it from a place of thoughtfulness and concern for one another, who will we trust to define love? If we do not join in helping to make channels so that the whole world can feel love in its most compassionate manifestations, who will we trust to direct it?

And what, after all, better defines our own lives than what and whom we love? What better describes us, each of us, than how and where we find, celebrate and share beauty?

[BBC News reported back in 2001](#) that astronomers were able to pinpoint the exact time, place and date in which Vincent Van Gogh finished one of his very last paintings. "The White House at Night" shows, as you may have guessed by that title, a small, white house at twilight under a large yellow star.

Astronomers at Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos calculated that the star is Venus, which was bright in the evening sky in June 1890.

They started by tracing the house, which still stands in the town.

Researchers Donald Olson and Russell Doescher say the canvas was painted from the bottom up during the course of an afternoon and early evening.

"You can see it's about 7:00 pm from the sunlight on the house, but as the sun sets, Venus becomes bright and obvious," said Mr Doescher, who added that he was astonished by the accuracy of the star's position in the picture.

Professor Olsen added: "In the painting, the light is coming from right to left, with the front of the house lit up, the left side of the house in shadow and the women near the gate casting shadows to the left.

"We stood in Van Gogh's spot and saw exactly this lighting effect on the house in the last hour before sunset."

A computer program calculated that Venus was in the position shown in the painting at around 8:00pm on 16 June 1890...

I found this news story to be a parable of sorts. Through Van Gogh's careful, creative and accurate portrayal of the planet of love and beauty, the evening star, Venus itself, astronomers were able to describe where he was and what he was doing...extrapolating out just a bit, through his communication of his own relationship to love and beauty, we were able to know him in a new way.

Though I may speak with bravest fire, and have the gifts to all inspire, and have not love, my words are vain, as sounding brass and hopeless gain.

Your experience, relationship to, and expression of love and beauty in your own life helps others to know something about you, to know where you are. Your ability to make channels for the streams of love that flow to and through you will define your relationship with all that is. It is the gift that you, each of you, offer to this world we share, so that not only Venus, but Earth, too, becomes a planet of love.