

## REWRITING THE HISTORY OF HELL THROUGH THE 21<sup>ST</sup>- CENTURY SCENE IN DAN BROWN'S *INFERNO*

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### **Abstract:**

*The twenty-first century is an era of radical, unexpected and fast changes in the political, social and cultural scene. Reality has become a slave to the socio-political interventions and instability leading to numerous questions rather than answers. The choice of Inferno is based on this observation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century as the rapid pace of changing events has stimulated a growing need for truth, reality and explanations. Brown's cryptic plot and his claim of Fact<sup>i</sup> create the very focus of this paper which is the question of historicity in this text. Put into the 21<sup>st</sup> century's historical context, Brown revisits Dantean Inferno<sup>ii</sup> of The Devine Comedy<sup>iii</sup> through the thematic focus on the overpopulation as a recent concern of the century, the metaphorical representation of characters, and their linguistic. As such, this paper will study the historicity of Brown's Inferno<sup>iv</sup>, highlight its parodic dimension, and unveil the hellish nature of the twenty-first century through the re-incarnation of the ancient fears into the present times and the deconstruction of the biblical image of hell.*

**Keywords:** *Hell, metaphorical representation, deconstruction, palimpsest, The Black Death, symbolic architecture, allegory, truth and fiction, history, post structuralism.*

### **I) Introduction to the question of Brown's Hell:**

Hell has become a confusing concept through research and interpretation. Notions like: the afterlife, the underworld had been of a great importance for many ancient nations; such as the Pharaonic era. Much interest has been given to the future dead body in the afterlife as much as the living one. The darkness of death and its certainty pave the way for a variety of interpretations, views, rituals etc... to occur and change from an era to another. In the Biblical teachings, sinners and wicked souls are to be punished eternally in an unknown dimension called hell<sup>v</sup>. The latter is referred to as darkness and as fire as opposed to heaven which are symbolic descriptions of hell as dark and of heaven as light<sup>vi</sup>. It is the place where wicked

souls remain after death. The symbolic language of the New Testament paves the way for a variety of interpretations of hell.

Literature is one of the fields that has shaped its image and opened it to an infinite set of interrelated depictions. Hell presents the unknown to human kind as much as the afterlife though many beliefs and cultures have created a variety of theories related to the topic hoping to define hell as a complete and entire structure. One of the works that has brought hell to become at the center of many novels, plays and poems is Dante Alighieri's epic narrative poem entitled *The Divine Comedy*. It describes the journey of the Italian poet to hell. The physical structure of this hell is of nine rings or circles. Every circle is meant to be a place for wicked souls depending on the nature of their evil deeds. Once again and through literature, the concept of hell has become a question mark and more open to interpretation.

*The Divine Comedy* is nothing but a work of art, certainly, but revisiting it through a 2013 novel entitled *Inferno* raises many questions. Indeed, Dan Brown starts his novel with a first separate page entitled "Fact" where he claims that "All artwork, literature science, and historical references in this novel are real". Positioning Dante's hell into a twenty first century context created by Dan Brown where he admits that hell "is the underworld described in Dante Alighieri's epic poem *The Divine Comedy*" under the same title "Fact" stimulates questions of whether the Dantean conception of hell is fictional or one of the celebrated features of the century? Does *Inferno* really keep the same conception of hell in *Inferno D*? At the same time, this claim of Fact and truth creates a mood of doubts around the concept of death itself, is it celebrated or is still a source of fear? Of course, the aim of this paper is not to find a definition or the location of hell but to reveal the levels on which the Brownian hell and the history of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are secretly interrelated and to which extent hell as defined in the Bible is becoming more of a question mark requiring more interpretations.

## II) The notion of fact and the historicity of *Inferno*:

*Inferno* is a thriller that is based on the idea of fact and reality to the point that its fictitious nature is becoming doubted. It is a text that describes itself as an authentic source of truth in most of its information and descriptions. It is somehow embracing the characterizations of a reflective historical text that G.W.F Hegel in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* defines as "partly presents itself as, i.e., part of the greater whole. Although it does abstract from the whole, it does form a transition to philosophic world history, by taking universal viewpoints (e.g., history of art, of law, or of religion)" (1988, 9). Indeed, historical text as described by truth can be known. The relationship between truth and history is one of the spots of literary criticism and philosophy. Brown launches his thriller *Inferno* with stating the fact about his novel including the claim that "artwork, science, and historical references in this novel are real". This claim somehow imposes a point of view that a reader is invited to view through when reading the novel. It is a direct invitation to believe and consider the truthfulness and the realistic nature of the components mentioned. Ironically, it is also an indirect stimulation for the reader to read the

novel so as to check the truthfulness of the claim itself. *Inferno* is a journey to decode a crime that will end up killing half of the population on earth by Dante's fanatic character named Bertrand Zobrist by Professor Robert Langdon.

This journey is detective in nature. At the metaphorical level, it is more likely to be a journey of self recognition as well through the symbolic settings and pieces of famous art in order to stop a coming Black Death<sup>vii</sup> from happening. There are many real settings described in Florence, such as the Medici Chapels, The Basilica of Saint Lorenzo, The Bargello Palace etc... As such, Brown convinces the reader once again with the authenticity of the setting and transforms his main character Langdon into a historian who visits real places and gives historical accounts on them. This style of writing can be adapted in movie scripts or documentaries to the point that a reader may even believe the truthfulness of the events in the plot. Usually, history and truth are two deeply interrelated concepts and the former is based on the idea of knowing the truth and consider it as entirely present. To convey this sense of truthfulness, omniscient narration<sup>viii</sup> plays its role in *Inferno* in a way that the author's voice becomes a source of fact, truth, authenticity and implicitly historical truth. However, a Derridean observation to *the play*<sup>ix</sup> of metaphor and language in *Inferno* reveals different conclusions related to the historicity of the text as a whole and to the notion of fact in particular.

### III) The Question of Hell:

The definition of hell in *Inferno* is described as a Dantean one in his *Fact* claim. This outlook on Dante requires a total similarity between the two figures of hell. According to this notion, *Inferno* is a repetition of *Inferno D* two when it comes to the study of the image of hell. However, the analysis of metaphors and symbolism break the limits of the claim above at different levels.

#### 1) Traces of the Black Death of Europe and *the play* of symbols: ❖ Dante or Zobrist?

Overpopulation is a current theme in *Inferno*. Characterization in the novel relates to this theme which is one of the concerns of 21<sup>st</sup> Century to The Black Death of Europe that was caused by a plague. Indeed, a close look at Bertrand Zobrist who is a genetic engineer symbolizing science and technology fixes his presence into the present moment of speech (the actual context). On the opposite side, Zobrist's characterization, especially his linguistic representation reveals the deviating of this man's symbolizing feature because of his being deeply obsessed with the medieval figure of the Italian poet Dante to the extent of creating a plague that would send the population to hell. In the Prologue of the novel, Zobrist insists repeatedly on the statement: "I am the Shade" (19). Brown defines shades as "bodiless souls trapped between life and death" (*Fact*) This internal monologue above represents Zobrist as a body without a soul and his soul is neither present nor absent which is a characteristic of a soul on its way to hell or to heaven. The statement, at the same time, reveals the dislocation of Zobrist within the present moment of speech. It is as

if he is in and out of this world in place and in time. Ironically, he describes a journey marked by real places as he says : "Along the banks of the river Arno, I scramble, breathless...turning left onto Via dei Castellani, making my way northward, huddling in the shadows of the Uffizi" (19). He goes further and says: "I am the Shade. Here above ground, I raise my eyes to the north, but I am unable to find a direct path to salvation...for the Apennine Mountains are blotting out the first light of Dawn" (19).

A close look at the two statements where Zobrist leaves a symbolic message to humanity highlights an oddity in the linguistic representation of a shade. The latter is supposed to be a metaphorical representation of Zobrist, as he attempts to present himself by being the shade and not by his name. The subjectivity presented by this example is problematic because it includes a definite article "the " to substitute for the person having a proper name already. The article is supposed to designate him and to be enough to anchor a specific person. However, the term "shade " limits the amount of clarity and puts into question the very choice of the definite article as a linguistic representation of Zobrist whose name we only know after but not in this message by his own choice.

Ironically, a shade is a reflection of the trapped soul in a place that is neither hell nor earth, but the same shade is moving between real historical settings and mentions them as if the latter is not just a soul or a bodiless soul but also still a body with flesh and bones and in motion on earth. Therefore the metaphorical use of the term "shade" opens the space between hell and earth. Conventionally, dead bodies release souls that are meant to be either in hell or in heaven but definitely not on earth, unless, hell and earth are metaphorically interrelated to be a space for shades. In this context, the shade is metaphorically trapped on earth itself which paves the way for the metaphor of hell on earth to take place in this discussion. As a result, fact is actually mixed with fiction.

Zobrist continues his message: "Without warning I turn and reach up, curling my fingers on to the high ledge, pulling myself up, scrambling on to my knees, then standing... unsteady at the precipice. *Guide me, dear Virgil, across the void*". (21)

Also, begging guidance from Virgil creates an interweaving of two supposedly different times, contexts and places also. Virgil, historically, is a poet and author of *Aeneas*. In *Inferno D*, he is the physical guide of Dante through *Inferno D* and *Purgatorio* starting this journey with "I will be first, and thou second shall be" (Canto IV, 21, *Inferno*). In here, Zobrist embraces the spirit and soul of Dante. This outlook at the medieval Italian figure of the poet adds another level of confusion about the world of the scientist Zobrist as if the two worlds are metaphorically fused as one. Zobrist's linguistic representation makes a marked change in the conception of the character from being a shade to a 21<sup>st</sup> century Dante whose goal is not simply to reach *Paradiso* but also to give a gift to *Mankind* \*which is hell. This very fact urges a comparison between Dante as a figure and Zobrist , or in other terms to

perceive Zobrist as Dante and the open end of the legend of *Inferno D* through the twenty-first century era. On another hand, a study of the language used to depict the symbols of plague and Robert Langdon's symbolic journey would create an aporiatic differal in the Derridean meaning of the term which will be analysed in the following part.

### ❖ Visions of Hell and the play of symbolism:

At the thematic level, Robert Langdon is an example of a history teller stimulated by the symbols and signs he encounters during his quest. He is a professor of symbology and art at Harvard University. From the very beginning of the thriller, Langdon is someone who suffers from hallucinations taking the form of hellish visions. He wakes up and opens his eyes only to find himself in a hospital in Florence Italy with no clues of why or how. Indeed, the internal monologue marked by the use of the italic style justifies, once again, a separation between the physical body and the mind of the character. It is as though Langdon is the absent present in the moment of speech. He is unconscious of what happened to him and hunted by terrifying visions of a veiled woman and dead bodies stuck in hell. "*What the hell am I doing in Italy?*" (32) is the psychological reaction the professor makes when realizing he is in an unexpected place to be. Burdened with such questions in mind, Langdon launches a quest of what happened to him and most importantly about the meanings of his visions.

The repeated acts of hallucinations of Langdon do not seem to originate from the present moment of the speech. The narrator mentions that:

The silver-haired woman with amulet was calling him again from across a bloodred river. Her shouts of desperation pierced the putrid air, clearly audible over the sounds of the tortured and dying who thrashed in agony as far as the eye could see. Langdon again saw the upside-down legs adorned with the letter R, the half buried body pedaling its legs in wild desperation in the air. *Seek and find!* The woman called Langdon. *Time is running out!* (60)

The quotation above is written in a cryptic and symbolic language that is meant to be decoded and explained. At the same time, the literary diction of blood and death seems to be dominant. It is as though a vision of massive death from the depths of hell suddenly reveals itself in front of the character. Metaphorically, the visions are inspired by Botticelli's *Map of Hell*<sup>vi</sup> painting. Later on, the sign differs to be discovered a symbol of one of the circles of Dante's *Inferno* as revisited by Botticelli in his work of art.

Towards the end of the book, those visions are decoded to become the result of the secret society called The Consortium whose Master provokes Langdon an amnesia to manipulate his brain with false memories including his visions on the purpose of guiding him to the location of Zobrist's plague source.

The constant change of signs and the meanings of the symbolic hallucinations of Langdon reveal the fact that the character is on a physical journey as well as allegorical journey filled with death visions and plague visions as well. In the previous part, Zobrist considers himself as a reflection of Dante in the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ironically now, Langdon's journey, guided by his hallucinations, background knowledge and his female partner, Dr Sienna Brook, is metaphorically a journey to *Paradiso*. It is a journey of self-discovery discovery and recognition and also a journey to discover the second historical version of the era.

The question here is around the book's final claimed truth related to information about the Consortium's attempt to bridge the gap between the world and the underworld is the final and main fact about Langdon's representation and journey in this novel: Does it mark the finishing borders of the text and reduce the history of the twenty first century to an opposition between the world and the underworld or just those of the book?.

In his book entitled *Aporias*, Derrida discusses the notion of end and final truth taking the example of death as a border between two worlds. He explains:

Let us consider, for example, this negative sentence: "death has no border." Or else, let us consider one of these affirmations, which all imply something completely different: "death is a border," "according to an almost universal figure, death is represented as the crossing of a border, a voyage between the here and the beyond, with or without a ferryman, with or without a barge, with or without elevation, toward this or that place beyond the grave. "Here, now, is an interrogation: "Can death be reduced to some line crossing, to a departure, to a separation, to a step, and therefore to a decease?" And, finally, here is a proposition that could be called interro-denegative: "Is not death, like decease, the crossing of a border, that is, a trespassing on death [un trepas], an overstepping or a transgression (transire, "sic transit," etc.)?" You have noticed that all these propositions, whatever their modality, involve a certain pas [step, not]. (6)

Derrida's example of death as a border explains the unfixedness of signs and their continuous deferral even though death embeds the sense of borderlines in its universal understanding. The quotation above highlights the concept of limit as a question rather than an end or a final answer. Likewise, Langdon's visions of hell open the gap between two different worlds that are supposed to be separate, the underworld and the actual one. Ironically, coming back to his senses does not save him from hell as a dark journey full of horror. Indeed, it stimulates the deconstruction of the plot and openness of it to further interpretations (breaking the borderlines) due to the metaphorical nature of its language and that of language as a whole. As such, the real places Langdon travels through in order to find the right clues of the case are metaphorically hellish in the Dantean definition of the term because of the metaphorical darkness of Langdon's perception of those places. They are not as obvious and historically marked as they may seem in *Inferno*. In here, the

notion of *fact* about all the descriptions needs to be revised and doubted. Where is reality in the truth claimed by the author? Put in a modern context and real settings of the novel; is it possible to conclude that space in *Inferno* is an imaginary space put into real setting? Who is the shade or what's a shade in this play of language?

## 2) The irony of the *World* <sup>xii</sup>:

Traces of death remain some of the backbones of *Inferno* at a variety of levels especially at the symbolic one. The linguistic representation of death occurs through a dramatic monologue that conveys death through a number of visions. The relationship between art and science is problematic in this novel. Characterization makes the link even more problematic, as the scientific and the artistic reflect each other through Zobrist but not necessarily through characters like Langdon or Dr Elisabeth Sinskey. The latter is a director of the World Health Organization (W.H.O). They do both have the same aim of stopping Zobrist's plan of limiting over population by the virus he creates under the influence and inspiration of the Dantean hell. In this context it is possible to perceive the plague of Zobrist as a metaphor of the European Black Death especially when studying the linguistic representation of Langdon's visions of the plague, as well as the symbolic messages of Zobrist throughout the novel.

One of the visions that hunts Langdon all the way through is that of the "fearsome mask with a long, beaklike nose and two fiery green eyes, which stared blankly out at Langdon. *Anh* mask" and that it are "nearly synonymous with the Black Death-the deadly plague that swept through Europe in the 1300s killing off a third of the population" (69). Historically, the Black Death marked a doomed period in Europe where the dark shadows of death and plague prevailed. In her thesis entitled *The Black Death and its Effect on Fourteenth- and Fifteenth-Century Art*, Anna. DesOrmeaux explains the major outcomes and disasters caused by the plagues and their effect on art of that period. She emphasizes that the plague killed half the population at that time. Therefore, the vision of the plague mask in *Inferno* does not simply represent the past Black Death but indeed symbolizes a new Black Death as put in a context of the twenty-first century. *Inferno* here is a metaphorical reproduction of a past history to the point that the 21<sup>st</sup> century history has become a question mark especially through the odd development of science to serve and celebrate the dark sides of medieval art and crisis. In this example, it becomes possible to highlight the effect of a shifting repetition that voices the past behind the veils of the present creating a fine line of intertextuality. Indeed, Linda Hutcheon in her book, *A Theory of Parody*, describes the intertextuality of texts as a repetition with difference. In this context, she states that "Irony and Parody become the main major means of creating new levels of meaning- and illusion" (30). As such, the traces of hell are established metaphorically not just through plagues but through the obsessive use of science as a deconstruction under the claim of changing the *world*.



Following the footsteps of what has been mentioned, *world* as a concept used in this novel might lead to an ironical account on its use in a way that disfigures the present development of science of the twenty first-century as it subverts the chronological view of history. The statement written by Zobrist and mentioned more than once in *Inferno* which says “In this place, on this date, the world as changed forever” (65) is supposed to be read after the release of the virus. It is put in the past tense before the time of its happening so that it remains a historical mark in the world. At the same time, Zobrist states a prayer to God in the Prologue of the novel where he says: “Dearest *God*, I pray the world remembers my name not as a monstrous sinner but as the glorious savior you know I truly am.” The two examples above put into question the notion of world or world knowledge in other terms as well as they disfigure the religious concept of God’s will on earth. In his essay *Derrida and the End of the World*, Sean Gaston summarizes Derrida’s criticism of Kant and Hegel in relation to the concept of *the world*. He explains: “In his reading, Derrida takes care not to speak of the “world” or of the “whole world” in his own name. This caution around one of the oldest of metaphysical props is compounded by his emphasis on the traps and ruses of the fictionality of creating or ending a world” (501).

The statement above subverts Zobrist’s use of the world as a target to his act of “salvation”. In fact, the language used by Zobrist embeds traces of prophecy and God like feature since he is concerned with the world as a whole. In this example, there is a sense of totality, limits and finished lines of a general system. The world as approached by Zobrist is one whole, well known structure that he masters and dares talking about as an ended system. Ironically, no clue in *Inferno* justifies such a total finite knowledge. A second irony is at the level of prayer. What God Zobrist is praying for when claiming the complete and absolute knowledge of the whole world? Universally, knowing all the world is one of the characteristics of the creator. In this case, this universal and religious understanding is subverted, disfigured and deconstructed by the misconception of *world* and the dislocation of such a concept in a context of religious prayer done by a metaphorical shade. Therefore, the visions of death, the prophecy of plague put into the 21<sup>st</sup> century denies the end of medievalism and establishes a shifting view of history from present to past and to future paving the way for science to become a parody of art.

#### **IV) The absence of History and the collapse of religion:**

One of the main conclusions that one may come is that there can be no history in the absolute meaning of the term. History is more of an interpretation which requires its constant absence as its end is put into question in *Inferno* which is a novel about disfiguring facts rather than reconstructing the truth. Moreover, it is possible to view the twenty-first century world, as represented in *Inferno*, as a metaphorical hell on earth because of the secret fusion of the voices of death with the power of technology and science. From this context, the biblical teachings have been decentralized to pave the way for the scientific conception of art to prevail and redefine the eternal on its own way. On the other hand, the origins of reality are lost



and constantly shifting through the deconstruction and reconstruction of a claimed historical literature that is in itself under the umbrella of the hectic revisiting of the past, the symbolic view of the present and the esoteric knowledge of the future. As such, literature partly participates in the creation of the hectic present of the twenty first century and keeps it under constant investigating. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is an era of forgetting history as a bordered sequence of events a rewriting it with an ink of multiple voices.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> *Fact* here is a concept and a claim in almost all of Dan Brown's thriller novels at the very first page. The choice of Italics is meant to convey this idea.

<sup>ii</sup> Will be referred to as *Inferno D* later on

<sup>iii</sup> *The Divine Comedy* is an epic poem written in three parts: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. It was written by Dante Alighieri during the fourteenth Century

<sup>iv</sup> Will be referred to as *Inferno*

<sup>v</sup> Revelation 21:8: "But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexual immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars-they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death"

<sup>vi</sup> Hell is marked by "darkness": Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30; Jude 13. Heaven is characterized by the light of God's presence (Rev. 21:23)

<sup>vii</sup> It will be explained later on

<sup>viii</sup> "Omniscient focalization is a traditional narrative method, which is featured that the omniscient narrator can narrate from any perspective and from any time and space." (Shen, 1998, p. 204)

<sup>ix</sup> Play is a concept given by Jacques Derrida about the openness of the system of signification "... the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum." (*Jacques Derrida, Structure, Sign, and Play*)

<sup>x</sup> Mankind will be treated as a concept in this paper from a deconstructive point of view

<sup>xi</sup> "The *Mappa dell'Inferno* (Map of Hell) by Botticelli, regularly called The Abyss of Hell or *La voragine dell'Inferno*, is one of the parchments that the famous Italian painter designed to illustrate an edition of *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri." (2013-2018 Florence-Inferno, [www.florenceinferno.com/the-map-of-hell](http://www.florenceinferno.com/the-map-of-hell))

<sup>xii</sup> Italics are mine

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