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## **A Comparative Study of the Prologues of Dante's "Inferno" and Dan Brown's *Inferno***

**Mr. S. Karthick**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bharathidasan University  
Constituent College, Lalgudi, Tamil Nadu, India.

### **Abstract**

The objective of this paper is to delineate how Dan Brown uses Dante's "Inferno" as his canvas to paint his recent novel *Inferno*. For a legitimate comparative study, considering the voluminous nature of both the works which will demand a full length research book, the paper confines itself only to their prologues. The paper deliberately discounts the apparent social issues like population control or religious issues like whether Dan Brown is against Catholicism etc., and focuses only on latent literary aspects in the domains of theme, style, diction, imagery and characterization of the novel.

### **Keywords**

Dante; Dan Brown; *Inferno*; Comparative Literature; Influence Study; Medieval Age vs. Modern Age.

Dante Alighieri, the greatest poet of all times has not only influenced innumerable poets like William Blake in 18<sup>th</sup> century; Matthew Arnold and Dante Gabrielle Rossetti in 19<sup>th</sup> century and T.S. Eliot in 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also great writers like Karl Marx and John Ruskin who wrote for social cause. Among the contemporary novelists, no wonder J.K. Rowling, Umberto Eco and Dan Brown are strongly influenced by this medieval poet, whose significance increases as much as we are removed from him in space and time. Eugenio Montale, the Nobel laureate in his concluding lines of final address delivered at the commemoration of 700<sup>th</sup> birth centenary of Dante held in Florence says that “the more distant from us his world becomes, the greater grows our desire to know him” (32).

It may seem paradoxical why Dan Brown had turned to Dante in his most recent international best-seller novel *Inferno*, because one usually associates the modern complexity consciousness and techno-space based exclusively on the experience of this cyber era life without regard for the religions and metaphysical perspectives afforded by Dante’s journey in to other worlds. The answer may be found in Scofield’s remarks on T.S.Eliot, who owes more to the Italian master than Dan Brown. He says that “The complexity of the modern world has also called for a sense order with which to manage it” (34) and no wonder that the search for this order would have drawn Dan Brown to Dante. Besides, Dante’s lucidity is something Dan Brown has imbibed and promulgated in his *Inferno* which has unjustly invited negative criticism about his style and use of simple language throughout the novel. Actually he has rejuvenated the interest of Dantology in academia and introduced the greatest religious and philosophical poet to the modern generation.

At the very outset before tracing the confluence of the prologues of both the works the paper shall briefly point out the disparities in what precedes it in the form of epigraph and ‘Facts’ in Dan Brown’s *Inferno*. Dan Brown acknowledges in chapter 38 of *Inferno*, the epigraph for his book, “the darkest Places in hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of

moral crisis” (Brown 1) is actually a misquote. It is actually not “derived from the work of Dante” (Brown 163) as he would make us believe and it does not reflect Dante’s depiction of circles of hell either. Because, in Dante’s inferno, the darkest places, the innermost abyss is reserved for traitors against their benefactors. This fourth ring of ninth circle dealt in the last canto of Dante’s “Inferno” called Judecca is fully covered by ice. Lucifer, the emperor of that kingdom with his three mouths rending Judas, Brutus and Cassius for betraying their benefactors and masters. Actually, in his third canto, the neutral angels and tepid “sorry souls of those who lived without disgrace and without praise” (35-36) and the ones that lived without fame or blame known as ‘Shades’ were placed well outside Dante’s inferno in ante-inferno, even before Limbo or the first circle inhabited by those who were worthy but lived before Christianity and without baptism. In fact the above-mentioned quote of Dan Brown repeated again in his epilogue as in other chapters, comes from a misquote on a speech delivered by the then president John F. Kennedy in Germany in June 1963 where he said, “Dante once said that the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a period of moral crisis maintain their neutrality” (Hagg 249). Likewise, another discrepancy is set at the very start of the book when Dan Brown states as ‘fact’ that Dante’s “Underworld is populated by entities known as “Shades” – bodiless souls trapped between life and “Death” (2). However in Dante’s “Inferno” canto III they are not trapped between life and death, they are totally and forever dead because he himself says, “I should never have believed that death could have unmade so many souls/...These wretched ones, who never were alive” (56, 64).

In the heart of Florence, the novel opens with a mysterious and a ghost-like figure who proclaims himself as “I am shade” and says “Through the dolent city, I flee./ Through the eternal woe, I take flight” (Brown 5). The significant relation of this novel to Dante is signaled at the very opening lines of the volume as it is the resonation of Dante’s introductory first canto of “Inferno” where he encounters his own master Virgil while impeded by three wild animals in the

sinister forest of the opening scene. He asks “Have pity on me”, unto him I cried/ whichever thou art, or shade or real man” (64-65) for which he answers “Not man, man once I was” (66). Likewise the following two lines mentioned above from the novel directly alludes to the opening lines of the third canto of Dante’s “Inferno” as an inscription above gates of hell as “Through me the way is to the city dolent/Through me the way is to eternal dole (1-2). Similarly in the novel the flight the desperate soul takes “that is still was fleeing” (25) onward like Dante’s “Inferno” canto I. It runs in heart of Florence “along the banks of river Arno” (Brown 5) where Dante was born and grew up “In the great town on the fair river” (95) as reported by him in his “Inferno” canto XXIII. When it says “ I scramble, breathless” (Brown 5) desperate to escape, pausing briefly in the shadows of the Uffizi, then racing north ward along via dei Castellani it resembles Dante in his prologue canto I of “Inferno” “who with distressful breath” (22) escapes from the dark forest. The shades pursuers gaining ground, their footsteps growing louder “They hunt (it) with relentless determination” (Brown 5) like the three beasts that impeded Dante’s ascent with fearfulness that “he abandoned hope of/ ever climbing up that mountain slope” (53-54). They pursued, persisted and kept him underground for years like a “chthonic Monster” (Brown 5). It mourns “I am unable to find a direct path to salvation ... for the Apennine Mountains are blotting out the first light of dawn” (Brown 5). The same is not the case with Dante in his lead canto because when he reached the bottom of a hill he says, “I looked on high and saw its shoulders clothed/already by the rays of the same planet (sun)” (16-17).

Though the milieu is different the time of the opening scenes of both the prologues is the same, Like the shade in the novel says “snaking through the early morning vendors” (Brown 5) for Dante “ The time was the beginning of the morning ”(36). Opposite the looming bulk of Bargello, the shade throws itself against the iron gate at the base of stairs of the ancient spire that rises above the church and cloisters of Badia, which stood there in Dante’s age within a

stone's throw of where he was born, its bell tolling the beginning and the end of each day. Though shade says "where all hesitation must be left behind"(Brown 5) echoing Virgil's caution to Dante in canto III, his legs are "leaden" unlike Dante's "firm foot always was the one below"(30) in his canto I. Yet, it climbs up in to the narrow passage and up the marble stair case the voices of his pursuers close behind him out of frustration he shouts " ungrateful land "(Brown 5) like Dante curses Florence for exiling him. As the shade clambers sky wards, tormented by visions like lustful bodies writhing in fiery rain, the souls of gluttons floating in their own excrement and far below the city, far below even the fires of hell, in the frozen depths where Satan holds 'treacherous villains' can be recognized instantly to horrific visions seen by Dante when he enters Dis. But, when the shade praises Florence as "Far below is the blessed city that I have made my sanctuary from those who exiled me" (Brown 5) Dante on the contrary reflects bitterly upon Florence, his native city, which has cast him to exile to Ravenna and sentenced him to death by burning at the stake if he ever returns. As the shade is standing on a narrow ledge high above the terracotta roof tops of Florence "spread out like a sea of fire on the country side" (Brown 6) Dan Brown is reaching in to Dante's "Inferno" for his own topographical description of the city. The shade too cries for help "Guide me, dear Virgil, across the void" (Brown 6) repeating the exact words uttered by Dante in the city of Dis. "The willful ignorant" (Brown 6) who madly chase the shade is very much identical with that of lukewarm condemned souls "Who have forgone the good of intellect" (90) in canto III which can be considered as an supplement to canto I of Dante's "Inferno". In the final seconds the shade "beholds a sight that startles" (Brown 6) him " with a sense of veneration" (Brown 7) like Dante had the vision of his beloved Beatrice with trembling heart with utmost reverence recorded in his introductory note to La Vita Nuova. Therefore, Beatrice is there too, who will evolve in to a silver haired woman with an amulet around her neck in chapters is the novel. Succeeding at last the shade throws himself from the bell tower,

but not before announcing his “Gift to mankind” (Brown 7), a modern day version of the Black Death that preceded renaissance, which will cull the world’s population. The shade calls his invention ‘Inferno’ and hints that “It grows even now... waiting ... simmering beneath the blood red waters of the lagoon that reflects no stars” (Brown 7) towards the end of the prologue, about the whereabouts of the deadly pestilence which will eventually be unleashed in spite of all the efforts of the protagonist Robert Langdon and his allies, in vain. The clue closes with the phrase “that reflects no stars” as did Dante’s “Inferno” that “resounded through the air without a star” (23) in canto III. It is fascinating to notice the novel itself ends with the word ‘star’ in epilogue is same as the last word of all the three books of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Therefore, the omnipresence of Dante almost like floating imagery right from the title, misquoted epigraph, direct quotations and allusions, a full chapter dedicated to Dante’s life and works to the wide range of adaptation and influence of Dante in the domains of setting, recurring themes and persistent imitation of Dante’s colloquial idiom and diction by the antagonist, one can hardly help observing how much Dan Brown owes to Dante. And this may lead some cursory or a firsthand reader to think less of him even to the extent of stealing or being a victim of Bloomian anxiety. It would unfairly deprive Dan Brown of his due recognition as one of the most original novelists ever to surprise the world. For Dan Brown transforms whatever he takes from Dante, he makes it distinctly his own by presenting them in a new light. Thus, a deeper reading of the confluence and disparity in adaptation of Dante’s “Inferno” in Dan Brown’s *Inferno* would reveal that the former text functions as a background and an undertone to reinforce the central theme of human endurance inculcated from the great humanist and poet of all times.

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