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Dan Brown’s Inferno

Research Paper- The Battles

Over the centuries the conflicts of the Italian peninsula have left an indelible mark on the development of Western civilization. The various power struggles between the neighboring cities coupled with the cultural growth of the entire region during the Renaissance created a rich history unmatched by most other areas of Europe. Allusions to the various battles between the great cities, Siena and Florence, can be found in both Dante’s and Dan Brown’s *Inferno*. Throughout Dante’s epic, a journey through the nine rings of Hell, he encounters a large number of malefactors from both sides of the conflict. They provide a human example for the sins that result in condemnation to Hell. Dante’s epic is brought up many times during Robert Langdon’s own journey, tying together the history behind each piece of literature.

The battles themselves also played a large role in the development of the region on the eve of the Italian Renaissance. They may have been obscured over time by larger European conflicts, but their influence can still be seen in both cities and in numerous of artistic achievements of the Renaissance; achievements that are featured prominently in Dan Brown’s novel. Furthermore, Dante has a personal connection to the conflict, as the reasons for his exile from Florence can be traced back to the politics and ideologies behind the hostility between two Florentine factions related to the conflict, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. Dan Brown, on the other hand has no personal connection to the conflict. However, in his novel *Inferno*, many of the clues Robert Langdon and Dr. Siena Brooks uncover on their search are related in some way to either Dante’s *Inferno* or the conflict itself. Brown’s true genius can be found in the subtle allusions and references he makes that the casual reader may not identify and subsequently appreciate.

The allusions and references Brown makes are connected to both the battles between Florence and Siena and Dante’s own journey. These battles are featured heavily throughout Dante’s journey through Hell, with many of the major players of the conflict integral pieces of the message Dante attempts to send with his seminal work. It is no surprise that Dante’s homeland and the battles that shaped it were a major influence in his writing.

Tuscany is a beautiful region on the western coast of the Italian peninsula, and is also home to two major Italian cities, Florence and Siena. While today these cities live in harmony under the Italian government, hundreds of years ago, they were separate sovereignties, and due to their booming economies and close proximity, conflict was inevitable. Throughout the early centuries of the 2nd millennia AD, the two cities grappled for control over both the rich soil of Tuscany and for greater influence over the people of the land. Due to their placement along the timeline of history, the battles between these two cities were heavily documented and romanticized by some of the best European minds of all time, including Dante Alighieri, author of Inferno. The historical context of these battles tends to give Dante’s Inferno much more meaning, as some of the otherwise unknown Italian figures, mere pawns in relation to the major historical figures Dante encounters, related to Siena and Florence can be understood.

The 13th and the 15th centuries on the Italian Peninsula were some of the darkest times in European history. Both eras saw sustained violence for years on end, with very little tangible gains coming from it. In the 13th century, much of the violence was between rival factions, political or familial, with conflicting ideologies or petty arguments. In the 15th century, with Florence expanding rapidly under the Medici family, the conflict was largely caused by their expansionary policy.

The Battle of Montaperti, the first major and, perhaps, most well known battle between the two city-states occurred on September 4th, 1260. The battle, commonly known as the bloodiest day of the Italian Middle Ages, found its roots in the conflicting ideologies between two groups, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. The Guelphs, who by 1260 had gained influence over Florence, aligned themselves with the Papacy, whereas the Ghibellines, who had power in Siena, supported the Holy Roman Empire. Despite the fact that the two cities had signed ‘an eternal peace” on July 31st, 1255, the friction between them eventually reached a boiling point due to a handful small skirmishes and overall ill will. In the early fall of 1260, the Florentines and their Tuscan allies assembled an army of 35,000 and marched towards Siena. Siena, led by a Ghibelline who had been exiled from Florence named Farinata degli Uberti, summoned only 20,000 men, but prepared to defend their city all the same. The armies met at a hill called Montaperti, hence the name of the battle. The hill, renamed Montaperti after the battle, directly translates to ‘hill of death’. In the traditional battle stratagem of the era, both armies focused on overtaking the opposing ‘Carroccio’, or, “the holy wagon that always accompanied medieval Italian armies, where priests celebrated mass during the battle.” The battle waged on for the entire day, proving to be a stalemate, despite the superior numbers of the Florentines. Eventually, the first point of reference found in Dante’s Inferno turned the tide of the battle. Bocca degli Abati, a (secretly) Ghibelline man fighting for Florence pretending to be a Guelph, made his way across the Florentine line, found the standard bearer (the man holding the flag, a point of organization for the entire army), and chopped off his hand, the flag dropping to the ground. A sense of panic set in among the Florentines, and the Sienese seized the moment and launched an all-out attack. The battle swayed permanently in favor of Siena, and the Florentines were hurt with heavy losses. In the nine ring of Hell in Dante’s Inferno, one will find Bocca degli Abati. This ring, the closest ring to the core of Hell where Satan resides, is reserved for traitors who are eternally stuck in ice up the their chins. Dante’s reference to Abati goes as follows.

Someone yelled, ‘What the devil’s eating you, Bocca? Isn’t it enough to chatter away with your jaws? Do you have to bark too?’ ‘So!’ I exclaimed. ‘Now there’s no need for you to say anything, you wicked traitor! Now I can expose the shameful truth about you to the light of day!

Dante, a Guelph himself, found a personal connection to this conflict and let Bocca degli Abati’s treachery live on in his seminal work, Inferno. The Battle of Montaperti played a major role in the history of the Italian Peninsula, and set the stage for both Siena and Florence to continue their conflict for the next few centuries.

In the 15th century, Florence was the focal point of a cultural rebirth known famously as the Italian Renaissance. Their newfound economic and cultural power, coupled with the strong leadership of Cosimo de Medici of the Medici family, found Florence on the precipice of domination. With Cosimo I de Medici leading the way, Florence embarked on controlling its neighbors either through diplomacy or force, all under the name of the Duchy of Tuscany. There was one city-state remaining in the region that stood a chance against the growing power of the Duchy, and that was Siena. There was also a broader conflict between France and Spain that instigated the fighting. France supported Siena, because it wanted a strong ally on the Italian peninsula, and Spain supported Florence because of its wealth and its control over the majority of Tuscany, which Spain wanted a hand in. On August 2nd 1551, a Florentine militia faced Sienese militia in the Battle of Marciano, the fight for control of the region. With each army reaching about 15,000 in number, the stage was set for a bloody day, but Florence won a sweeping victory, as their superior artillery simply overpowered the men of Siena and their allies. The Sienese suffered many losses in the form of death, wounds, and prisoners, while the Florentines, relatively speaking, did not lose many men. The battle undeniably had a great collective effect on the shaping of both cities well within the grips of the Renaissance. One of the tangible products of this effect plays a very important role in Robert Langdon’s quest in Dan Brown’s Inferno. The day of the battle, as a trophy of sorts, the Florentine soldiers collected over 100 green flags that the Sienese had been given by French royalty as a sign of support. After the battle was over, Cosimo I had Giorgio Vasari paint a large mural commemorating the battle inside a governmental Palace in Florence, the Hall of Five Hundred. Giorgio Vasari’s depiction of the Battle of Marciano hangs in that spot to this day. This painting, one of the best artistic achievements of the Renaissance, provides Langdon and Dr. Siena Brooks (who’s name is not a mere coincidence) with a major clue hidden within the painting. The phrase “cerca trova”, Latin for, “Seek and ye shall find”, can be seen on a green flag (one of the green flags the Florentines had seized) within the painting. “Cerca trova” is one of the most prominent and important clues Langdon and Brooks come across throughout the novel. It appears in the very first chapter of the book, where a mysterious woman (eventually found to be WHO director Elisabeth Sinskey) appears to Langdon in a dream, reciting the English translation of the term. It later appears as an anagram, CATROVACER, in the first clue Langdon finds. The phrase itself, Seek and Ye Shall Find, is a biblical allusion (Matthew 7:7) that is actually a direct quote from Jesus Christ. That historical and religious connection provides a certain sense of importance, or gravity, to the phrase. Perhaps the reason the phrase “cerca trova” appears on a green flag in Vasari’s famed painting is a very minor allusion to Jesus’ bloodline in the Da Vinci Code. The green flags, a gift of the French, contains one of the only significant biblical references in the novel (of an author who usually creates his plots around controversial religious theory). In the Da Vinci Code, the eventual bloodline of Jesus Christ is believed (proven, within the context of the novel) to have ended up in a French family. Although a quotation of Jesus is a small connection, in the grand scheme of Dan Brown’s Inferno, it is one of the only biblical references Brown makes, which draws much more attention to it, especially considering the amount Brown relies on the Bible and Christianity in few of his other, more well known novels. The connection of “Cerca Trova” to Brown’s novel shows how intertwined Montaperti and Marciano are with both works of literature. Brown’s ability to intricately connect his novel with these important battles in history is perhaps his best feature as an author.

The works of both Dante Alighieri and Dan Brown were heavily influenced by the conflict between Siena and Florence. These battles, Montaperti and Marciano, reflect the beginning and end of a clash between two powerful Italian city-states vying for control of Tuscany. The fight for control had subliminal implications as well; the conflict between the two cities also served as a medium for the fight between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines (pro-Holy Roman Empire vs pro-Papacy) and a struggle for European hegemony between France and Spain. The conflict itself was arguably the most influential and important to both Dante and Dan Brown’s Inferno. The Battle of Montaperti, featured more heavily in Dante’s Inferno, provides several characters and themes that Dante encounters on his journey through Hell. The Battle of Marciano, which occurred after Dante’s death, has a heavier influence on Dan Brown’s Inferno. While Montaperti is referenced multiple times in Dante’s work, Marciano is only alluded to once, but it is an extremely important topic. The phrase “cerca trova”, one of the most prominent and heavily relied on clues by Langdon and Dr. Siena Brooks on their journey, is found in a Vasari fresco depicting the fateful battle. Both battles helped to shape the development of a region on the eve of the greatest period of cultural and intellectual growth in European history. Many of Italy’s greatest authors and painters commemorated the battles with their works, Dante’s Inferno being just another example. Dan Brown’s novel is a tribute to both Dante’s work and the history behind it. These major points in Italian history can be greater appreciated through the works of two great authors, and two great Infernos.

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