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**SEMIOTIC STUDY OF SYMBOLS IN DAN BROWN'S "INFERNO"
NOVEL**

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ABSTRACT

This study is aimed to describe semiotic studies concerning symbols and their meanings found in Dan Brown's *Inferno* (2013) novel. This study uses a descriptive qualitative method which tries to identify, to analyze, and to describe the symbols found in Dan Brown's *Inferno* novel using semiotic theory by Charles Sanders Peirce (1991). The data for the finding and analysis were taken from Dan Brown's *Inferno* novel. The result of this study shows 30 symbols which are related to Christianity, Dante Alighieri's life, The Seven Deadly Sins, The Divine Comedy, The Black Death, Transhumanism and Humanism movement.

Keyword: *Semiotics, Symbols, Dan Brown's Inferno Novel, Peirce's Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Language can be defined as a system of communication that uses symbols and signs to deliver its meaning. In fact, symbols and signs are something that usually found in daily life as a vehicle of language to shape a concept or an idea. Peirce (1991:240) points out that symbol is a sign which would lose its essential if there is no interpretation due to its relation beyond the object. In short, symbol is something that denotes something else such as but not limited to words, phrases, or another expression that connects to its meaning without having the physical relationship with whatever is being symbolized; hence, the interpretation is

needed based on the provided context. For example, symbols can be found as traffic light or cross symbol; in this sense, once those symbols recognized by mind, the meaning is produced as in traffic light red light for stop, yellow light for indicating it will go green, and green light for proceeding with caution; and cross symbol for Christian. Thus, symbols are mostly given their meaning by humans or community based on their usage, and then those meanings and interpretations based on context and subtext presented.

In simple, symbols as communication do not only appear in our daily life but also are included in the design of literary works such as in poetry, prose,

and drama. In literary work, the usage of symbol is called symbolism; moreover, when the symbolism is used by the respected authors of literary works, it can be deciphered beyond its literal meaning. This idea is supported by Fadaee (2011) that the use of symbol, involves using an object, an attitude, a belief, or a value in order to represent an abstract idea; it takes something ordinary or basic and makes it more than what it is in reality (as cited in Hadjira, 2013:14). As a matter of fact, the author can hint a mood in literary work also using symbolism such as in “The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe” a fantasy novel by Carol Lewis uses winter season to tell the reader implicitly about the despair caused by the White Witch of Narnia. Symbolism is used to give the broader meaning more than what it is presented and induce awareness and intensity about the important issue discussed in literary works.

In the event that symbols and signs need to be studied formally to extract the meaning of symbolism occur in literary work, ones conduct the study with semiotic. Eco (1979) indicates “Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else” (as cited in Chandler, 2007:2). By taking Eco’s definition of

semiotics, it is implied that sign is not only what the eyes can see on the surface but also through the deep consideration and analysis of its meaning. Semiotic connects the symbol which symbolizes and the meaning which taken from the community’s agreement. Its study involves signs and symbols as elements of language in the system of communication. In addition, it is not necessary to see symbols as the visual concept, such as symbols in poem or novel that based on sentence or phrase need to be understood by implied meaning. In another hand, it can be seen as gesture likewise forefinger up while the rest are closed means ‘one’ as Liszka (1996:5) points out that no matter how a sign is manifested, for example, as a sound, picture, thought, feeling, action or naturally occurring event still the formal conditions which make it a sign would be present.

In semiotics, there are two significant figures that establish its fundamental theories. Firstly, Saussure (1959:15) defines that it is possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life. Saussurean theory treats semiotics as the way to see the signs by using psychological approach because it relates to human communication. Secondly, Peirce (1991:234) declares more specifically that ideas are signs and he

considers that logic is applicable to study their character as signs in semeiotic. Semiotic is a process how meaning is created and communicated; this process is called semiosis. All things considered, ones can identify and define symbol, however symbolic system is not only spoken of the symbols itself but also with the set of formal rule that combines symbols to express the meaning.

In this case, the writer uses one of literary work from Dan Brown to study semiotic. *Inferno* by Dan Brown is novel that aspired by The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri. In this artwork of Dante Alighieri tells about the journey of Dante who is guided by Virgil in visiting three realms – Inferno, Purgatorio, and Paradiso. Likewise, *Inferno* novel describes the journey of Robert Langdon with Dr Sienna Brooks and Elizabeth Sinskey in finding the hidden plague created by Bertrand Zobrist, a mad scientist who wants to cure overpopulation by infecting 1/3 world population into sterile virus. Signs and symbols are used to decorate its intrinsic elements for solving the clues of obstacles presented in the plot.

In the Peircean model, something is qualified as a sign when it has the three elements: the representamen, an interpretant, and an object. According to the

Peircean triadic concept (1991:239-240); the sign is an entity for what is represented (an object), how it is represented (the representamen), and how it is interpreted (an interpretant). In correlation of sign, the idea of a sign is representamen that represents the sign of its quality either in pictorial, textual, symbolism or signage. The object is a direct reference to its signs or its denotation; furthermore, the object can refer to the character of signs that is called connotation. In result of the relationship between representamen and object appeals the mind and proposes an interpretation for the sign requires interpretation to achieve a meaning. According to Peirce (1991:251), there are three kinds of signs which relate to the object in different ways that elaborate as follow:

1. Symbol/ symbolic: a mode in which the signifier does not resemble the signified but which is fundamentally arbitrary or purely conventional, e.g. alphabetical letters, morse, code, traffic light, national flags.
2. Icon/ iconic: a mode in which the signifier perceived as resembling or imitating the signified that may be termed as likeness (recognizable looking, sounding, feeling, tasting, or

smelling like that) e.g. a portrait, a cartoon, metaphors, realistic sounds.

3. Index/ Indexical: a mode in which the signifier is not arbitrary but is directly connected in some way (physically or casually) with the signified depends on the intention and its correspondence fact e.g. smoke, thunder, footprint, thermometer, a ringtone of the message.

Furthermore, the interpretant is the less or more clarified meaning or ramification, a kind of form or idea about the difference between whose sign is true or unreceptive. In making interpretation of signs, there is a must to the correlation between representamen and its object where the reference of signs cannot stand alone without what it is referred to because every sign is determined by its object. Consequently, the connection between representamen and object produces a meaning as its conclusion which is the interpretation of the sign.

DISCUSSION

In this section, there are some symbols found in Dan Brown's *Inferno* novel that are discussed and analyzed using Peirce's semiotic triangle concept (1991) where in extracting the meanings of symbols, the relationship between *representamen*, *object*, and *interpretant*

needs to be found. The relationship in each analysis is addressed as *R* for *representamen*, *O* as *object*, and *I* for *interpretant*.

First symbol is identified as written text in page 85 as 'a three-headed, horned Satan who was in the process of eating three different men at once, one man in each of his three mouths' [R] that personates the Black Death in reference [O]. The symbol itself is carved on the biohazard-tube seal which is acknowledged as a common image in Middle Age that associated with the Black Death. Later on, the storyline also mentions the presence of three-headed satan in a mosaic of the Baptistry of San Giovanni that resembles the torturer for the damned. In result, the three gnashing mouths of satan symbolize of how efficiently the plague ate through the population [I]. As the relationship between symbol and the recurring obstacle in the novel can be seen through the impact of Bertrand Zobrist's plague which is fast in curbing the population in the future.

Second symbol is found as written text on page 93 as 'carnal malefactors' [R]. The representamen means as the second circle of Hell which the Hell consists of nine circles according to Dante Alighieri's *Inferno* part. This second circle is projected to the lustful which is one of the Seven

Deadly Sins [O]. The carnal malefactor itself is an eternal windstorm that blows the lustful as they are punished by their inability to control their desire [I]. The desire reflected by the carnal malefactors in the context of the novel can be seen through the social issue which is an overpopulation due to the inability of mankind to control their desire in procreation.

Third symbol is written text on page 96 as ‘the eyes of death’ [R]. The representamen is found in the lower right corner of La Mappa of Botticelli penned as “the truth can be glimpsed only through the eyes of death” that later on referring to Dante’s Death Mask [O]. This symbol is the first clue given by Bertrand Zobrist to find the plague which means that ‘the eyes of death’ itself symbolizes to the Dante’s Death Mask that acquires Robert Langdon to peer into the back of the mask for finding the truth [I].

Fourth symbol is identified symbol that was found in the written text on page 118 as ‘a laurel wreath to his cap’ [R]. This representamen is pictured in the most of Dante Alighieri’s figure. The laurel wreath itself refers to Poet Laureates that people recognize nowadays [O]. After connecting the relationship between the representamen and the object, the interpretation is generated as of a matter of fact that Dante

Alighieri is regarded as one of the finest poets that Italy has ever produced and he has a major influence in Western culture for his magnificent work which is The Divine Comedy [I].

Fifth symbol is taken from written text as ‘The gates are open to you, but you must hurry. Paradise Twenty-five’ [R] on page 251. This representamen refers to Canto XXV of The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri [O]. The Paradise Twenty-five comes as the clue from Ignazio Busoni to Robert Langdon for the location of hidden Dante’s death mask which is mean that Langdon needs to read through Canto XXV Paradise of The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri. Later on, it shows that Robert Langdon should go to The Gates of Paradise to find the death mask [I]. The Gates of Paradise is crafted of gilded bronze and over fifteen feet tall, the doors had taken Lorenzo Ghiberti more than twenty years to complete. They were adorned with ten intricate panels of delicate biblical figures. Such a relation to the theme in this novel, initially the bronze doors were made as the commissioned as a ‘votive’ offering to God – a show of gratitude that Florence had somehow survived from the plague. Furthermore, Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise had served as the cathedral’s front doors since the mid-twentieth century.

Sixth symbol is identified symbol taken from written text as ‘the octagonal shape’ [R] on page 309. This refers to the number in Christianity [O]. The representamen is found in the Baptistry of San Giovanni when Robert Langdon tries to find the exact location of hidden Dante’s death mask. It is situated on the mezzanine of the baptismal church. The octagonal shape that refers to number eight in Christian belief standing for rebirth and recreation that embodied in the infantry in christening ritual [I]. The interplay between circle (dome) and square (angular octagon) speaks of the transition zone between earth and heaven where this relates to the inspired *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri to the theme of the object of this study.

Seventh symbol is identified symbol in written text as ‘Humanity-plus’ [R] on page 393. The sign-vehicle represents Transhumanism movement [O]. Humanity-plus is a symbol that stands for the international organization which advocates the ethical use of advancing technologies to enhance human capacities. This relates to the role of Bertrand Zobrist in the novel where he is the elite of organization. This belief and perspective led Bertrand Zobrist to create a virus or plague that he thought could save the world from the apocalypse of overpopulation by

curbing one-third population into infertile. Hence, this transhumanism movement is representing the motive of Bertrand Zobrist when he creates the plague [I].

Eighth symbol is collected symbol found in written text form as ‘The emblem of a bright red, equal-armed cross’ [R] on page 510. This written text represents a symbol of The Red Cross as its object [O]. The Red Cross is an international humanitarian movement which was established to protect human life and health ensuring respect for all human beings. The organization prevents and alleviates the human suffering. The sign is produced in Geneva Convention and the name taken from the movement itself. This symbol is also called ‘Greek Red Cross’ to distinguish from George Red Cross. Following the topic of the novel, the humanitarian movement is pointed out by Robert Langdon when he tries to save the world from the dangerous plague. This visible sign is chosen for protection acts under 1949 Geneva Convention. In the result, the connection for the sign and object itself is the humanitarian movement which is represented in protection symbol for armed forces’ medical service [I].

Ninth symbol is an identified symbol taken from written text clue as ‘the chthonic monster’ [R] on page 514. In the

novel, the chthonic monster is taken a shape of Medusa's head which is located in the northwest corner of the cistern as the base of two columns. Tradition has it placed sideways or upside down to negate the power of Medusa's petrifying gaze. Chthonic is translated from Ancient Greek means 'beneath the earth'. Medusa and the entire class of chthonic deities live underground because they are associated directly with Mother Earth. In the allegory, "chthonic" are always symbols of the fertility whose functions including the earth itself and the dead. Later, Bertrand Zobrist describes that overpopulation is a "monster" looming on the horizon as the ticking bomb that will give more bad results than good ones. Thus, relating to the story that combines both words of "chthonic monster" to represent Bertrand Zobrist's plague [O], it tells that the plague found by Robert Langdon nearby Medusa's eyes direction combats the overpopulation by making 1/3 world population sterile as a way to cure overpopulation problem [I].

Last symbol is taken from written text as 'the crescent and star' [R] on page 612. The representamen is known as a symbol of Ottoman Empire on the Turkey Flag, however the further analysis is acquired to match the context. Turkey Flag is a red flag featuring a white crescent and

star. The flag is often called as Al-Bayrak or the Red Flag in English. This design is derived directly from Ottoman Empire which had been adopted since the late 18th century. The crescent and star symbol is vastly known as an ancient symbol that used in numerous historical context as well as representing The Ottoman Empire that extended into Islamic symbol too. The use of this ancient symbol is actually taken pre-dates Islam emerging into the world back by several thousand years. It was not until the Ottoman Empire that the crescent and star symbol became associated with the Muslim world. When the Turks conquered Constantinople (now is called Istanbul) in the 15th century, they adopted the city's existing flag and symbol. It is known that Diana (Artemis) was the patron goddess of Byzantium whose symbol was a moon. In 330, Emperor Constantine dedicated the Constantinople to the Virgin Mary whose symbol was the star that overimposed the crescent [O]. Later on, when Constantinople was sacked by Ottoman Turks and renamed the city into Istanbul, the new rulers adopted the existing emblem for their own use. Referring to the Hellenic goddess whose ruling the childbirth and Woman figure in Christianity, those are partly reminded ones with the topics in the novel that relate to overproduction

population and its adapted plot from *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri – journey to purge sins in Christian belief [I].

After examining this novel, it is clear that the author of “*Inferno*” novel, Dan Brown, decorating the storyline with symbols that are not only used to beautify the storyline but also to deliver some important topics regarding the theme. Furthermore, to extricate the meanings of symbols in this novel, a deep comprehension to the context and to the theory used in this study are required. Consequently, the meanings of symbols are described and the interpretation of literary work is appreciated.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the finding and analysis conducted from the *Inferno* novel by Dan Brown, the conclusion is gathered by referring to Robert Langdon’s journey to find the plague accompanied by other characters who are Dr Sienna Brooks and Elizabeth Sinskey. The triangle semiotic concept of Charles Sanders Peirce (1991) is used and drawn to analyze the symbols occur in *Inferno* novel in order to generate the meaning of each symbol, they are representamen, object, and interpretant. The representamen is the form which the sign takes. The object is to which the sign

refers to. Meanwhile, the interpretant is not the interpreter but rather than the sense made of the sign. In result, there are 30 identified symbols are taken from the clue given by Bertrand Zobrist and mentioned symbols in the novel regarding the plot in Robert Langdon’s journey.

After each symbol was analyzed and explained using Peirce’s semiotic triangle concept, the writer could conclude that Dan Brown as the author of *Inferno* novel uses various symbols to emphasize the topics in this literary work consist the meanings of symbols as the following: Christianity, Dante Alighieri’s life, The Seven Deadly Sins, *The Divine Comedy*, The Black Death, Transhumanism and Humanism movement. Consequently, the use of symbols in *Inferno* novel by Dan Brown is well-produced as it does not only beautify the storyline but also strengthen the topics that wanted to be delivered by the author.

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