



# ENGLISH B EXTENDED ESSAY

*November 2018*

---

CATEGORY: 3

Effect of Dan Brown's descriptions of monuments on readers

How effective are Dan Brown's descriptions of Italian monuments to engage readers?

*Number of words: 3764*

**INDEX:**

<b>INTRODUCTION:</b> .....	3
<b>CHAPTER 1:</b> .....	4
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b> .....	6
<b>INTERPRETATION OF THE DESCRIPTIONS OF ST. MARK'S BASILICA:</b> .....	6
Architectural descriptions .....	7
Metaphorical aspect of the descriptions.....	8
Connections with History and Culture .....	10
<b>INTERPRETATION OF THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PALAZZO VECCHIO:</b> .....	11
Architectural descriptions .....	11
Metaphorical aspect of the descriptions.....	12
Connections with History and Culture .....	14
<b>INTERPRETATION OF THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PITTI PALACE:</b> .....	15
Architectural descriptions .....	15
Metaphorical aspect of the descriptions.....	16
Connections with History and Culture .....	17
<b>CONCLUSIONS:</b> .....	19
<b>REFERENCES:</b> .....	21

### **INTRODUCTION:**

“Inferno” is by far the novel that most impact has had on me ever. The popular character Robert Langdon returns to the game, this time he will try to prevent a world crisis, against a lunatic genetic engineer willing to reduce overpopulation.

There is something that I have to emphasize, this is the quality of descriptions that the writer, Dan Brown performs and that contribute for this book to be my favorite.

That is exactly what motivates me to develop this Extended Essay work: my objective is to establish the features of Dan Brown descriptive style, and analyze the effect and impact that this way of narrating has on readers.

To achieve this, I will have to choose some fragments where the author’s style is clearly reflected; so that, after performing a deep interpretation of them, I could be able to come up with some strong conclusions.

## CHAPTER 1:

Dan Brown is an American writer born in New Hampshire in 1964, who published the book “Inferno” in 2013, having as protagonist to his popular character Robert Langdon.

One aspect that can be highlighted the most about Dan Brown is his literary ability to create prodigious descriptions that contribute to narrate the plot of his story, locating readers metaphorically “inside” his novels. This aspect acquires particular importance when it comes to providing details to places, cities and monuments.

This writer has been influenced considerably by Italian culture and the literary production of Dante Alighieri. Throughout this book, Dan Brown has located the development of his story in the impressive scenery of Italy, and the most important passages take place in some important monuments of this country.

In an interview done by the National Public Radio<sup>1</sup>, he declared that he was particularly inspired by Dante and his brilliant production “The Divine Comedy”, to which he referred as a great artistic achievement. He confessed that “The Divine Comedy” had a significant impact on him; he was an Italian senior school student when he read it for the first time and he was really surprised that it had been written seven centuries ago.

The aspect that had the greatest effect on him was the descriptions that Dante used when representing hell. In his own words, *“it was the darkest, scariest*

---

<sup>1</sup> Brown, D (2013, May 18) Interview: Dan Brown, Author of “Inferno” (National Public Radio). Gathered from: <https://www.npr.org/2013/05/18/183902954/dan-brown-inferno-is-the-book-that-i-would-want-to-read>

*thing I had ever read*"<sup>2</sup>. For an 18 years teenager, who was first discovering the literary world, finding this high-quality production had an immeasurable influence in his personal style.

Dan Brown also mentioned that this book seemed as "the perfect ground for Robert Langdon". He is a Harvard professor, with Master studies in iconology and symbology that had spent a big part of his career studying and analyzing the symbols presented in "The Divine Comedy"... Then, who could be a better option to deal with a biological crisis, if the only way to save the world is solving a mystery with clues related to the symbols and icons of this book? No one, but him.

On his way to write "Inferno", its penman had to spend a lot of time traveling to many Italian cities, entering to the monuments to gather information that would be used when describing them in his novel. Nevertheless, he finds this kind of experiences not only amazing and entertaining, but also, enlightening.

During the interview<sup>3</sup>, Dan Brown stated that, in every novel, he includes some common elements, such as codes, symbols, and beautiful locations. After having read a bit about his background, now I can say that these features of his style are a clear reference to his role model, Dante Alighieri.

---

<sup>2</sup> Brown, D (2013, May 5) Dante's 'Inferno' inspired Dan Brown's 'Inferno'. (USA Today) Gathered from: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2013/05/14/dan-brown-inferno/2155335/>

<sup>3</sup> Brown, D (2013, May 18) Interview: Dan Brown, Author of "Inferno" (National Public Radio). Gathered from: <https://www.npr.org/2013/05/18/183902954/dan-brown-inferno-is-the-book-that-i-would-want-to-read>

## **CHAPTER 2:**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, one of the most important elements (if not the most important) for the writer of “Inferno” is to have accurate, flowery descriptions; and in this book he achieves that goal by far. The way he presents monuments, characters, facts and situations is worthy of admiration.

In my opinion, the whole process of reading “Inferno” was fully entertaining, mainly since the descriptions of Dan Brown served to catch the attention of readers. But there were three elements that attracted my attention the most because of the richness of the narration, they are:

1. St. Mark’s Basilica
2. Palazzo Vecchio
3. Pitti Palace

These all are monuments where the plot took place, but that is not the reason why they are attractive. They are unforgettable because Dan Brown described them so perfectly that one feels like been there in that precise moment.

That is why in this chapter I will focus on interpreting the descriptions of these three monuments, and I will follow the same format for every interpretation.

### **INTERPRETATION OF THE DESCRIPTIONS OF *ST. MARK’S BASILICA:***

To start analyzing the descriptions of the first monument, St. Mark’s Basilica, it is necessary to identify its subtopics. In order to point out these aspects, I had to make a comparison between the three monuments and find common aspects that can relate them. That is how I decided to use the following subtopics, which somehow resume the content of the monument’s narration:

- a. "Architectural description",
- b. "Metaphorical aspect of the descriptions" and
- c. "Connections with history and culture".

### Architectural descriptions

Regarding the first subtopic, the author starts detailing in a very specific way the most important architectural aspects of St. Mark's Basilica, referring especially to the physical and visual characteristics of the monument. In this section, the first thing that he refers to is the proportion between the width and length of the basilica; besides describing one of the most important elements of the monument: the 5 domes:

*"Wider than it was tall, the church was topped by five bulging whitewashed domes that exuded an airy, almost festive appearance"<sup>4</sup>*

When mentioning this element, the author uses the term "whitewashed", since they feature a light color, representing the purity and peace that should characterize a basilica and Saint Mark himself, for his sainthood quality. In addition, he uses the adjective "bulging", due to the dimension and shape of the domes. This conception is complemented through the comparison that the author makes with other well-known monuments like Notre-Dame or Chartres, exalting the magnificent design of the St. Mark's Basilica.

In this same section, the author mentions the statue of Saint Mark, which decorated the central peak:

---

<sup>4</sup> Brown (2013) Inferno, p. 257

*“High atop the central peak of the church, a slender statue of St. Mark gazed down into the square that bore his name”<sup>5</sup>*

The first qualifying adjective used to describe it is "slender". This term has a great importance that can be linked to the beginning of the fragment, when Dan Brown describes the basilica as "soft", due to the fact that both concepts belong to the same semantic field. In addition, the author uses the term "shimmering" to describe the winged lion on which the statue is standing at, this word is used to represent the luminosity of the essence of the church:

*“Against this colorful backdrop, the golden winged lion of Venice stood as the shimmering mascot of the city”<sup>5</sup>*

#### Metaphorical aspect of the descriptions

In the second subtopic, the author did not simply describe the physical characteristics of the basilica. Instead, he gave a “deeper” background to his descriptions. Dan Brown starts this section with a general description of St. Mark’s Basilica, through the use of the adjective "soft":

*“In contrast to the austere gray towers of Notre-Dame or Chartres, St. Mark’s had a decidedly soft and whimsical appearance”<sup>5</sup>*

This means that this monument is pleasant to behold, also meaning that the basilica makes a great first impression. The word "whimsical" is also used, meaning that the monument in question is, to some extent, extravagant or unusual. In this description, the author uses an antithesis, since the adjectives "soft" and "whimsical" are antonyms. It means that the basilica is so magnificent

---

<sup>5</sup> Brown (2013) Inferno, p. 257



that it features characteristics of all different kinds, and that any person can enjoy, no matter their personal preferences.

Dan Brown also mentions that this monument was "imposing", but at the same time "down-to-earth":

*"St. Mark's seemed imposing and yet, somehow, far more down-to-earth"*<sup>6</sup>

We can see once again that antonym adjectives are used, element which complements the previous idea, since it means that the basilica has the best possible characteristics of any type and category, making it so wonderful.

In addition, the author makes a comparison between St. Mark's Basilica and a meringue- topped wedding cake:

*"...causing more than a few of the guidebooks to compare St. Mark's to a meringue-topped wedding cake"*<sup>6</sup>

This due to the color of the basilica and the shape of it: the domes of the church would be the levels of the cake; while the meringues are the ornaments of the basilica, such as the statue of Saint Mark, the winged lion or the horses.

The wordsmith also talks about the appearance of the domes, mentioning that it is "almost festive":

*"...five bulging whitewashed domes that exuded an airy, almost festive appearance"*<sup>6</sup>

This means that the domes give the basilica a cheerful appearance, which invites people to enter and observe the treasures it hides.

---

<sup>6</sup> Brown (2013) Inferno, p. 257

He also talks about the background of the winged lion, saying that it was "dotted with stars":

*"His feet rested atop a crested arch that was painted midnight blue and dotted with golden stars"<sup>7</sup>*

This means that this monument is so spectacular that it is worthy of the brightness of the stars, or even be considered as one; as if the starry sky and the basilica merged into one.

### Connections with History and Culture

In the beginning of this subtopic, the author says that the Basilica is "*one of Europe's finest specimens of Byzantine architecture*"<sup>7</sup>; this reflects that he has studied several productions Byzantine architecture and still, he finds this monument above the rest.

*"It was beneath the golden lion, however, that St. Mark's displayed one of its most famous treasures—four mammoth copper stallions—which at the moment were glinting in the afternoon sun"<sup>7</sup>*

In this subtopic, the author gives his personal opinion about an element of the Basilica, saying that the four mammoth copper stallions were one of the most important treasures that the basilica has; this emphasizes the impact that this description has on the readers

In addition, he narrates the fact that this treasure had been stolen, to make us understand that not everything was perfect about this monument:

---

<sup>7</sup> Brown (2013) *Inferno*, p. 257

*“These four priceless stallions—like so many treasures here in Venice—had been pillaged from Constantinople during the Crusades”<sup>8</sup>*

### ***INTERPRETATION OF THE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PALAZZO VECCHIO:***

#### Architectural descriptions

Regarding the first subtopic, Dan Brown begins by specifically detailing the visual characteristics of the Palazzo Vecchio facade, referring in particular to the shape of it:

*“With its robust quadrangular facade and rusticated square-cut battlements...”<sup>9</sup>*

The author mentions that it had a quadrangular facade, and uses the adjective "robust", to convey the message that this facade, and the entire monument itself, was imposing and colossal. It may also mean that the Palazzo had a superb appearance. In this section, Dan Brown also mentions the square-cut rustic battlement. A battlement is a block of stone that is superimposed on a wall; this means that the monument had a defensive bearing, which inspired respect for any visitor. This is exactly the effect it has on readers, emphasizes the idea of the Palazzo as a large and imposing monument.

---

<sup>8</sup> Brown (2013) *Inferno*, p. 257

<sup>9</sup> Brown (2013) *Inferno*, p. 125

*“...the massive rooklike building is aptly situated, guarding the southeast corner of the Piazza della Signoria.”<sup>10</sup>*

Then, the author talks about the location of it; when doing so the Palazzo is described as a massive rooklike building, which only reaffirms the idea that this was like an impenetrable fortress, capable of providing protection.

In this same section, the penman mentions a unique element of Florence, the spire that rises off the center of the fortress:

*“The building’s unusual single spire, rising off center from within the square fortress”<sup>10</sup>*

To describe this spire, the term "unusual" is used to give the idea that it is something very special, that could not be seen anywhere else. In addition, the quadrangular shape of the Palazzo is mentioned once more, which can be interpreted as if this monument was unfathomable, catching the attention of readers.

#### Metaphorical aspect of the descriptions

The author once again gives a "deeper" background to their descriptions. Dan Brown begins this section with a comparison between the monument and a giant chess piece:

*“The Palazzo Vecchio resembles a giant chess piece”<sup>10</sup>*

The term “giant” has great importance since it magnifies the appearance of the Palazzo Vecchio. Besides, when comparing it to a chess piece, it not only refers to its quadrangular appearance, but also conveys the message that this

---

<sup>10</sup> Brown (2013) Inferno, p. 125

monument played a very important role for the city where it was located, Florence; as in the case of a chess game, in which each piece matters and is necessary for the strategy of the game.

When he describes the building's spire, he mentions that "*it cuts a distinctive profile against the skyline and has become an inimitable symbol of Florence*"<sup>11</sup>, which means that this component of the monument allows visitors and readers to appreciate Palazzo from a different perspective than they had previously. In addition, when he says "against the skyline", it gives an air of grandeur and an enigmatic appearance to the monument. Also, with this description, a contrast can be made between the lower part of the monument, which was described as imposing and colossal with the delicate and soft appearance that Dan Brown gives to the spire. Through this description, the author finds a perfect balance between the upper and lower components of the monument, which keeps readers captivated.

Then, he describes the elements that adorn the entrance to the palace, saying that "the building imposes on its arrival visitors an intimidating array of masculine statuary". In doing so, he uses the adjectives "imposing" and "intimidating"; to give the monument a somber appearance, which is used to intimidate visitors who arrive at the Palazzo Vecchio. It is important to mention that the term "intimidating" is used to describe the statues of male figures, which means that, for the author, these ornaments that decorate the entrance can become annoying, or disturbing.

---

<sup>11</sup> Brown (2013) *Inferno*, p. 125

### Connections with History and Culture

In opposition to the previous fragment, for this monument Dan Brown included many aspects related to history and culture. As mentioned in chapter one, Brown had to dig a lot to be able to write this novel, visiting countless places in Italy and entering a variety of monument. That's why he was able to draw on vast information that helped him to nourish the plot of his book "Inferno".

To begin with this subtopic, the author mentions that this monument was *"built as a potent seat of Italian government"* <sup>12</sup>. The adjective "potent" is used to highlight the idea that the Palazzo Vecchio was like a fortress. Then, Dan Brown describes the statue of Neptune standing on four sea horses; it is important to mention that Neptune belongs to Roman mythology and is the god of the seas, which is why it stands on four sea horses:

*"Ammannati's muscular Neptune stands naked atop four sea horses, a symbol of Florence's dominance in the sea"* <sup>12</sup>

In addition, he uses the term "muscular" to highlight the characteristic perfection of a god.

*"A replica of Michelangelo's David—arguably the world's most admired male nude—stands in all his glory at the palazzo entrance"* <sup>12</sup>

To finish, the author introduces the description of David by Michelangelo, saying that he was the most admired nude in the world, also mentions that he was in "all his glory"; this has an important effect on the readers: it makes them

---

<sup>12</sup> Brown (2013) Inferno, p. 125

recognize the greatness of the statue; the term “glory” and “admired”, contributes even more to transmit that message of majesty.

## **INTERPRETATION OF THE DESCRIPTION OF THE PITTI PALACE:**

### Architectural descriptions

Regarding this section, Dan Brown starts by saying that the facade is made of stone:

*“The Pitti Palace’s stone façade...”*<sup>13</sup>

Stone is known to be hard, so from the beginning we are conveyed the idea of the Pitti palace as a strong and resistant monument.

Then, the author gives more detail about this facade:

*“Its exterior of bulging, rusticated stonework...”*<sup>13</sup>

By saying "bulging", Dan Brown makes us imagine a cluster of stonework that have blended so perfectly and harmoniously that they have been able to form a majestic palace. The term "rusticated", allows us to realize that this monument is ancient and with an air of sobriety. In addition, it refers to the copper color, feature of the Pitti Palace.

The writer also mentions that the facade of this monument is characterized by a repetition of windows:

*“a powerful repetition of shuttered windows and arch-topped apertures”*<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Brown (2013), *Inferno*, p.102

With the term "powerful", readers can have two interpretations: the first is that there are a lot of windows that decorate the entrance to the palace. In the other hand, the second is that these windows are arranged in an orderly and logical manner, making this facade look perfect and impeccable. When describing the windows the adjective "shuttered" is used, this means that not everyone is allowed to see what is inside, giving the monument a dark and intriguing appearance.

#### Metaphorical aspect of the descriptions

*“Still almost a quarter mile away, the Pitti Palace’s stone facade dominated the landscape, stretching out to their left and right.”*<sup>14</sup>

When starting the fragment, Dan Brown mentions that the facade "dominated the landscape", which means that this monument was so majestic and impressive even for visitors are far away from it. The palace captured the attention of all of them, even though they were actually a quarter mile away. In addition, the author says that it was stretching out to both right and left side, this means that as the visitors approached the palace, it became increasingly imposing and majestic. This idea is reinforced when the author mentions that *“its exterior of bulging, rusticated stonework lent the building an air of unyielding authority”*<sup>14</sup>. In this description, the adjective "unyielding" takes on great importance.

---

<sup>14</sup> Brown (2013), *Inferno*, p.102



*“The Pitti Palace, however, was situated in a low valley near the Arno River, meaning that people in the Boboli Gardens looked downhill at the palace.*

*This effect was only more dramatic.”<sup>14</sup>*

Then, Brown states that visitors who were in the gardens had to look down to see the monument. This makes contrast with the previous descriptions: the palace is described as majestic; however, here the author gives the monument a more “earthly” appearance. To complement this idea, the author affirms that this made the monument even more dramatic.

After this, the author narrates that the monument seems to have been created by nature itself:

*“One architect had described the palace as appearing to have been built by nature herself”<sup>15</sup>*

This means that the Pitti Palace had a great compatibility even with the place where it was located, which enhances its airs of majesty.

### Connections with History and Culture

For this monument, there are two connections with History and Culture, one for each:

*“Traditionally, formal palaces were situated on high ground so that anyone in the gardens had to look uphill at the building”<sup>15</sup>*

---

<sup>15</sup> Brown (2013), *Inferno*, p.102

As mentioned above, the Pitti Palace didn't follow this "rule". This means that Lucca Pitti, who this palace was built for, wanted to break conventions and create something special.

*"The solid stone structure of the Pitti Palace was so imposing that Napoleon had once used it as a power base while in Florence" <sup>15</sup>*

With this fragment, the author supplements the idea that the palace was a kind of fortress. The term "power base", transmits the idea that this monument was not only beautiful in the outside, but also had a role during war clashes

## **CONCLUSIONS:**

Having as basis the three interpretations previously made for three different monuments, I can establish a “generalization” for Dan Brown’s descriptive style.

This author is for long, the most complete writer I have ever read. But what surprises me the most is the facility he has to make long descriptions (we must not forget that “Inferno” is a 609-pages book) look really short, avoiding this way making readers bored.

Dan Brown is not the kind of author that leaves its narrations with a denotative meaning. On the other hand, its descriptions always have connotative meanings. For him, a novel can’t be completed if the descriptions held on it have just a literary sense, they must have a figurative sense to be perfect and able to draw the attention of the public. This means that there will be always a “hidden” message on every part of the novel that Dan Brown wants us to discover, as if they were pieces of a puzzle that we must solve to see the full image and completely understand the intention of the writer. That is exactly what makes his style so rich and his productions interesting to read and analyze.

The second conclusion is that Brown will always include details that can upgrade the impact of his descriptions, I am referring to the connections with history and cultural elements that he encompasses while describing monuments. For every reader, discovering things while having fun is the most enlightening situation that we can experience. Dan Brown’s goal is not just entertaining the public, but also he wants to encourage us to acquire knowledge and awaken our sense of curiosity.

The third and last conclusion is that Dan Brown tries to give the readers a mental image of the monuments he describes. That is why he always makes comparisons between them and some real-life elements, such as a wedding cake, in the case of St. Mark's Basilica or a chess piece, in the case of the Palazzo Vecchio. This writer uses a lot of adjectives that facilitate the understanding of the readers. And he usually mentions the word "appearance", because he wants us to imagine what we read.

**REFERENCES:**

Brown, D (2013) "Inferno". United Kingdom: Doubleday

National Public Radio (2013) Dan Brown: 'Inferno' Is 'The Book That I Would  
Want To Read'. Gathered from:  
[https://www.npr.org/2013/05/18/183902954/dan-brown-inferno-is-  
the-book-that-i-would-want-to-read](https://www.npr.org/2013/05/18/183902954/dan-brown-inferno-is-the-book-that-i-would-want-to-read)

Nine planets (2018) Neptune facts. Gathered from:  
<http://nineplanets.org/neptune.html>

The Museums in Florence (2018) Pitti Palace. Gathered from:  
[http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/Pitti\\_palace.html](http://www.museumsinflorence.com/musei/Pitti_palace.html)

USA Today (2013) Dante's 'Inferno' inspired Dan Brown's 'Inferno'. Gathered  
from: [https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2013/05/14/dan-  
brown-inferno/2155335/](https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/books/2013/05/14/dan-brown-inferno/2155335/)