

Dante club essay



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The novel *The Dante Club*, written by Matthew Pearl, begins with John Kurtz, Chief of the Boston police, investigating a murder that occurred in 1865. The man murdered was Artemus Prescott Healey, who was the highest official of the Massachusetts courts. Healey's body was found naked and covered with insects and maggots on a sandy beach next to his property. His chambermaid insisted that he was still alive when she found him days later, and that he cried out before dying. Then Pearl introduces us to James T. Fields who is the publisher of poets and the head of Ticknor and Fields Co. He is the most successful publisher in America.

Henry Longfellow, James Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, George Washington Greene, are authors and poets, who work for James T. Fields and they are all part of the Dante Club. They are in the process of completing the first American translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This is an epic poem that tells a story by Dante Alighieri in the early 1300s. It is known to be one of the greatest works in the world. The project of translating the *Divine Comedy* from Italian to English is not accepted by Augustus Manning, treasurer of the Harvard Cooperation, who came to see Fields and told him that he doesn't want him to publish the translation.

He informs him that if he did go ahead and publish the poem, the university would cancel all contracts with his publishing company. According to Fields, the university fears that the poem might ruin the reputation of the university. A week later, Reverend Talbot was found dead. The body had been buried upside down in the ground and the victim's feet were lit on fire. Dr. Holmes recognized that the way the victim was killed was similar to the way preachers were punished in Dante's poem.

Later, Phinneas Jennison, a wealthy contributor to the Harvard Corporation and a friend of the Dante Club was found sliced open exactly down the middle and killed in the same way as people in Dante's *Inferno*. The Dante Club recognizes that this death and Healey's death were also similar to the punishment of the people in Dante's poem. As a result, they seek to find the killer themselves. The murderer is a former Civil War soldier named Dan Teal and becomes convinced that Dante alone understood the need for perfect justice in the world. Teal killed all the people who want to stop the translation of the poem. Commentary

The *Dante Club* written by Matthew Pearl is a historical fiction novel. In this book, Pearl used detailed description to paint pictures in the reader's mind and to make the book real and more interesting. He also used mystery to arouse curiosity in the reader and to make the reader read on. The theme that literature has a powerful influence on people was also shown in the novel. The purpose of this essay is to discuss these three points of interest: description, mystery and the theme that literature has a powerful influence on people. Examples from the text will be presented to explain these three points of interest.

The first point of interest that will be presented in this essay is how the author, Matthew Pearl, introduced mystery throughout the story to arouse suspense and curiosity for the reader. According to Dictionary.com mystery is defined as " anything that is kept secret or remains unexplained or unknown. " Mystery was introduced on the first page when Pearl wrote about a murder. For example, he wrote " On one side, the Irish woman who discovered the body was blubbering and wailing prayers unfamiliar (because

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they were Catholic) that prickled the hair in Kurtz's ear ;"(3) In this example we do not know who got murdered.

The reader is kept in suspense and wants to read on to find out who committed the murder. Pearl succeeded on the first page to grab and maintain the reader's attention. Another example of mystery was when the chambermaid who discovered the body all covered with maggots claimed that she heard the victim cry. The coroner said that it was impossible for him to have cried because maggots only eat dead tissue. This was stated when Pearl wrote " Mr. Barnicoat, the coroner, says that your chambermaid's belief that the chief justice was alive when she found him is scientifically impossible-a hallucination. (13)

The reader questions here, which is right the coroner or the chambermaid. Another example of mystery was when the Dante Club persisted to translate the poem entitled " The Divine Comedy" and Augustus Manning, treasurer of the Harvard cooperation, threatened to cancel all contracts with the publishing company if they published it. The mystery, here, was that the reader does not know why the university is opposed to such a thing. The reader also questions " What is the Divine Comedy? " What is in this poem that the university fears might ruin their reputation?

Pearl provides the reader with this clue about the content of the poem when the character Osgood says, " The content of the work is at this time unknown except to say that it has never been read in our country and shall transform the literary landscape. " (16) With this quote, Pearl definitely captures the reader's attention and creates suspense. In addition, the reader questions '

How is the poem linked to the murders that occurred in the novel? " This is the task of the reader to unravel this mystery. The second point of interest to be discussed is how Pearl used detailed description to paint pictures in the reader's mind.

According to Dictionary. com description is defined as " a statement, picture in words, or account that describes; descriptive representation. " One example of excellent description was shown on page when Kurtz, the chief of the Boston Police, took Mrs. Healey to see her husband's body. He writes " The pockets of devoured flesh left in their wake spanned all open areas; the terrible swelling at the back of the head still seemed to pulse with maggots even after their removal. The nostrils were now barely divided and the armpits eaten away.

With the false teeth gone the face sagged low and loose like a dead accordion. " (10) Pearl paints a gruesome picture for the reader and again succeeded in creating curiosity in the reader's mind. One question asked is " Who would do such a thing? " Another example of detailed description was presented on page 34 when Lowell saw Hill with a blue paper and on it was a handwritten quotation by a British deceased poet who wrote about Dante's poem.

The quotation states, " What hatred against the whole human race! What exultation and merriment at eternal and immitigable sufferings! This description showed the reader that the poem must contain some interesting content; again, arousing curiosity for the reader. The final point of interest to be presented is the theme that literature has a powerful influence on people.

According to Dictionary. com literature is defined as “ writings in which expression and form, in connection with ideas of permanent and universal interest, are characteristic or essential features, as poetry, novels, history, biography, and essays. ” Literature does have a powerful influence on people.

This was shown when Teal, the murderer, and a former Civil War soldier, killed all the people who want to stop the translation of the poem. The way he killed the people was the same way Dante explained it in his poem. Lowell and Holmes made the connection when they went to see where the body of Healy was discovered. Pearl wrote “ Lowell was transported by a vivid idea. The Neutrals thirds canto chooses neither good nor evil and thus is despised by Heaven and Hell alike. They are stung incessantly by gadflies and wasps, their blood mingle with the salt of their tears, and all this is mopped up at their feet by loathsome worms.

This putrid flesh gives rise to more flies and worms. Flies, wasps, and maggots were the three types of insects found on Artemus Healey’s body. ” (150) As can be seen, Matthew Pearl used many techniques to arouse interest and curiosity in the reader. He used mystery, detailed description and the theme that literature has a powerful influence on individuals. I have learned how Matthew Pearl linked his novel with the Dante’s poem. How each victim that got killed was a representation of the poem The Divine Comedy.