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***A New Historicist Examination of the Conspiracy
Theory in Dan Brown's Inferno in the Light of
Post Covid-19 Pandemic***

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Dedication

In the name of Allah

We dedicate this work to our dear loving mothers who supported us and have always been
there for us

We dedicate this work to our dear fathers, sisters, and brothers, as well as our supportive
friends

We also dedicate this work to our teachers, thank you for teaching us and without you we
wouldn't have been here today

We sincerely thank you all for your love and support

And we give a special thanks to ourselves for working hard and not giving up.

Badrelboudour & Moustafa.

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Abstract

This study examines the implications of the conspiracy theory portrayed in Dan Brown's novel *Inferno* (2013). The study explores how *Inferno*'s conspiracy narrative resonates with post-truth sentiments and distrust of institutions in the pandemic's aftermath, potentially perpetuating such attitudes. By contextualizing the text within the COVID-19 crisis, the study sheds light on the power relations and cultural anxieties underpinning conspiracy theories, and their potential implications in a post-pandemic world. Through the

lens of New Historicism, the analysis investigates how the novel’s sinister plot to release a bioengineered depopulation virus is shaped by the power dynamics and cultural anxieties of its era. Additionally, Michel Foucault’s theories on biopolitics, governmentality, and power-knowledge relations are employed to unpack the portrayal of population control measures and the conspiracy’s motivations. Findings suggest that *Inferno*’s conspiracy theory validates radical solutions, fueling distrust in institutions and control over populations. This analysis contributes to the understanding of how contemporary fiction can both reflect and reinforce societal anxieties, potentially influencing public discourse and attitudes towards scientific institutions and global health initiatives in an era of increasing skepticism and misinformation.

Keywords: *Inferno*, New historicism, Conspiracy Theory, Bioterrorism, COVID-19.

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General Introduction

The allure of conspiracy theories in literature has long captivated both readers and scholars. It has attracted intellectuals from centuries earlier offering a unique lens through which to understand societal beliefs and anxieties. One notable example of this phenomenon in literature is the conspiracy in Dan Brown's novel *Inferno* (2013), a literary work of fiction that weaves together historical mysteries and conspiracy theories, thereby engaging readers and encouraging them to question accepted truths. *Inferno* was released at a critical moment in the socio-historical landscape, when the world grappled with the consequences of the 2008 financial crisis, which left societies sceptical of institutions and governments.

In the early 2010s, this prevailing distrust was amplified by a growing skepticism toward traditional news media. Simultaneously, the digital age became a new era for conspiracy theories. Thus, social media platforms provide fertile ground for the rapid dissemination of unverified information, enabling the spread of alternative narratives and the flourishing of conspiracy theories.

The release of *Inferno* coincided with the heightened prevalence of conspiracy theories, further fueled by the advent of social media. This convergence allowed the novel's thematic content to resonate with the ongoing discourse surrounding conspiracy narratives. Furthermore, *Inferno* engaged with historical and artistic references, particularly drawing inspiration from Dante Alighieri's "Inferno". This artistic homage not only enriches the novel's literary depth but also contributes to the conspiracy narrative by linking it to centuries-old cultural and historical themes.

Dan Brown's *Inferno* is a work of fiction that portrays a conspiracy related to overpopulation. The novel is based on the premise that the earth's population has grown beyond sustainable levels, and a group of powerful individual elites, seeks to address this issue by creating an engineered virus and a vaccine that will reduce the population to more manageable levels. The story follows the adventures of Robert Langdon, a Harvard symbologist, who attempts to thwart the plans of Bertrand Zobrist, a billionaire philanthropist. Zobrist's conspiracy theory is grounded in the belief that the world's elite secretly manipulate global affairs to maintain their power while exploiting the majority of the population. He devises a scheme to release a deadly virus, which he sees as humanity's reckoning, forcing a choice between voluntary population reduction or extinction. The narrative's complex portrayal of conspiracy theories, particularly in the context of a post-pandemic world, forms a critical focus of this study.

While the readers have been attracted to its symbology and plot, the world struggled with a pandemic, a real world health threat, and an era marked by skepticism and loss of trust in governments and public institutions. Therefore, the relevance of *Inferno* in such times extends beyond fictional narratives. The parallel between the implications of the conspiracy theory elements in this literary work and real-world events in the context of post-pandemic era is deserving of a critical examination. This latter leads us to explore if it is only a matter of time for fiction to become a fact.

Conspiracy theories in the context of the post-pandemic era with its unprecedented challenges and uncertainty are a powerful ground for analysing. The emergence of the pandemic has led to a decrease in the level of confidence that people have towards societal institutions along with an increase in the spread of false information as well as bioterrorism fears. Consequently, it provided ideal conditions for the growth of conspiracy tales. A vital part of the research problem is centered on

investigating how *Inferno* uncovers the post-pandemic landscape and if it becomes possible by that time for fiction to turn into actual facts.

The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably transformed the way we perceive and engage with the world. The pandemic has not only triggered significant changes in our daily lives but has also fueled a surge in the proliferation of conspiracy theories. As people struggled with the uncertainty and chaos brought about by the pandemic, many turned to conspiracy theories to make sense of the situation. This shift towards conspiratorial thinking and esoteric beliefs during the COVID-19 pandemic is a phenomenon that has piqued the interest of scholars and researchers in various disciplines. Simultaneously, the realm of fiction, particularly literature, has played a crucial role in reflecting and sometimes shaping societal anxieties, fears, and narratives. Dan Brown's novel *Inferno* is a prime example of a literary work that combines elements of conspiracy theory, esoteric thinking, and apocalyptic themes. It offers an intriguing perspective on the implications of conspiracy theories in a post-pandemic era, as it intertwines a fictional narrative with the real-world context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The aim of this research is to explore the implications of the conspiracy theory in Dan Brown's *Inferno* in a post-pandemic era. Through mirroring the events of the novel to the contemporary real-world context, this study aims to analyze how fictional narratives as in *Inferno* reflect real world concerns and influence societal attitudes towards real similar events. Thus, the primary objective of this dissertation is to analyze the conspiracy theory in Dan Brown's *Inferno*, mainly in relation to bio terrorism, genetic engineering, and transhumanism which are identified as the engineered virus in the novel as well as the vaccine suggested by Zobrist, in order to project these concerns on

contemporary bio-security concerns such as genetic modification fears and health threats in the post-pandemic context.

By achieving the objectives, this research study contributes to enhance our understanding of the relationship between popular fiction, conspiracy theories, and public perceptions. The findings are expected to contribute to academic literary studies, cultural analysis, as well as informing policymakers, educators, and society at large about the far-reaching effects of conspiracy narratives in contemporary societies, particularly in the post-pandemic era.

The dissertation seeks to provide answers to the following main research question: How does the conspiracy theory in *Inferno* reflect the health crisis in the post-pandemic era as a fact? In order to answer the mentioned question, this study will attempt to answer the following sub-questions: First, how does the fictional bioterrorism plot in *Inferno* intersect with real-world concerns about pandemics like covid19 and bio-security in the aftermath of COVID-19? Second, how does the conspiracy theory in *Inferno* contribute to the spread of misinformation and distrust in vaccine efficacy and safety?

Numerous scholars have shown a keen interest in the intersection of conspiracy theories, the pandemic discourse, and the literary oeuvre of Dan Brown as a subject of scholarly inquiry. This topic has proven to be a contentious domain, garnering commendation from numerous critics across Brown's literary works, spanning from the seminal *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) to the latest works *Origin* (2017).

Among the researchers delving into the intricacies of Brown's novel *Inferno* (2013), is Amany Abdul Kadhom Abdul Ridha, whose study "The Fatal Disease of Autoimmunity in Dan Brown's *Inferno*" (2022) engages with the philosophical, literary, and psychological dimensions of autoimmunity as portrayed in Brown's narrative. Ridha explores the allegorical implications of autoimmunity, drawing parallels between the

body's immune system and societal responses to perceived threats, including political turmoil. While shedding light on the psychological implications of autoimmune response, Ridha leaves unexplored the thematic terrain of conspiracy theories and pandemic narratives within Brown's work.

Similarly, Azhar Jalil Saeed and Rosli Talif offer an examination of transhumanist themes in their study "The Negative Utilitarian Transhumanism as a Salvation to Avoid Apocalyptic Future of Humanity: A Case Study of Bertrand Zobrist in Dan Brown's *Inferno*" (2022). Their analysis interrogates the convergence of transhumanism and negative utilitarianism through the character of Bertrand Zobrist, illuminating the ethical complexities inherent in endeavours to mitigate human suffering through technological augmentation. However, their exploration overlooks the broader context of conspiracy narratives that permeate Brown's fictional universe.

In a distinct vein, Mustafa Amjed Jasim Al-Hameedawi and Sajjad Issa Ajlan Al-Moussawi adopt a Marxist lens in their research paper "A Marxist Study of Dan Brown's *Inferno*" (2023), probing the novel's portrayal of power dynamics, class stratification, and socio-political critique. Their analysis exposes the underlying socio-economic tensions depicted in Brown's narrative, highlighting the exploitation inherent in capitalist structures and the consequences of unchecked population growth. Yet, their inquiry remains circumscribed, omitting a comprehensive examination of conspiracy motifs and their implications.

In contrast, this study endeavours to broaden the scholarly discourse by foregrounding the thematic significance of biotechnology, transhumanism, and the pandemic narrative within Brown's work. By examining the connection between these themes with conspiracy theories and vaccine hesitancy, this investigation aims to ravel

out the socio-political reverberations of contemporary literary discourse, offering a holistic perspective on the cultural resonance of Brown's work in the post-pandemic era.

To answer the posed research questions, this study utilizes New Historicism in the analysis of Dan Brown's *Inferno* within a post-pandemic context, which involves a thorough examination of the intertwined themes of transhumanism, bioterrorism, and genetic engineering. It will depict how these elements are portrayed in the novel against the backdrop of the contemporary world shaped by the aftermath of a pandemic. New Historicism encourages to explore how societal anxieties surrounding transhumanism, bioterrorism, and genetic engineering during the post-pandemic era manifest in Brown's narrative. By considering historical contexts, this study aims to unravel the implications of the conspiracy theory in the novel, assessing how they reflect and influence societal attitudes towards scientific advancements and ethical dilemmas.

This dissertation is divided into two comprehensive chapters. The first chapter provides an overview of plague literature, tracing its evolution and thematic underpinnings. Herein lies an exploration of how literature has often portrayed the specter of pandemics throughout history. Moreover, the chapter examines the conceptualization of conspiracy theories, particularly within the realm of contemporary fiction. Drawing from diverse literary sources, it explores the terrain of conspiracy narratives, unraveling their socio-political implications and cultural significance. Furthermore, it moves into the realm of biotechnology and transhumanism as depicted in Brown's novel, dissecting the ethical and existential dilemmas posed by humanity's quest for technological transcendence.

The second chapter starts by providing a critical review, which deals with the interplay between fiction and reality within Brown's seminal work, *Inferno*. The chapter unfolds the reflection of contemporary health crises within the conspiracy theory

propagated by the virus "Inferno", unraveling the problematic threads of post-pandemic anxieties and vaccine hesitancy. Moreover, the chapter depicts the influence of *Inferno's* conspiracy theory on real-world perceptions of bioterrorism and pandemic preparedness, demonstrating the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction in shaping public discourse. Furthermore, it interrogates the role of *Inferno's* conspiracy theory in exacerbating vaccine misinformation and fueling public skepticism, leading the urgent need for critical engagement with fictional narratives in an era of disinformation. Ultimately, the chapter concludes with a reflective synthesis of findings, highlighting the complex interplay between literature, the conspiracy theory, and societal anxieties.

Chapter One:

**A Theoretical Approach of Plague Literature, Conspiracy
Theories, Biotechnology, New Historicism, and Transhumanism
in Literary Contexts**

Introduction:

Humanity constantly seeks to unlock the rich meanings and cultural resonances within literary works that have shaped our experience across time and place. This chapter weaves together several theoretical frameworks to offer powerful lenses for interpreting profound themes in literature. It begins with plague literature, exploring narratives from ancient to modern pandemics. Writers have used the metaphor of plague to examine human frailty, resilience, and civilization's vulnerability. The chapter conceptualizes conspiracy theory and its history in literature. Also, it addresses literature's engagement with biotechnology and transhumanism. As humanity explores enhancing and transcending biological limits, speculative fiction raises questions about identity, embodiment, and the essence of the human experience, sparking crucial dialogues on future boundaries. Finally, the chapter explores New Historicism, recognizing that all literary expression emerges from and engages with power, ideology, and cultural context. This approach reveals how literature reflects and shapes sociopolitical realities as well as how literary traditions address urgent contemporary questions and the quest for revelatory truths about the shared human experience.

1. Plague Literature:

To comprehend plague literature, one must first understand the concept of a plague and its origin. A plague is an infectious disease of epidemic proportions that spreads rapidly over a large geographical area, afflicting and causing severe illness or death in a high proportion of the population. It is caused by a virulent pathogen, such as a bacterium or virus, which can transmit easily between individuals through direct or

indirect contact. This pandemic had a profound impact on societies and led to the inspiration of a variety of cultural responses including art, literature and social revolts.

Plague literature is a genre that explores the profound impact of epidemics and pandemics on individuals, communities, and societies. It also explores themes related to outbreaks of infectious diseases such as the bubonic plague, Ebola, and Covid-19. These literary works often deal with the physical, psychological, and social as well as the existential implications of widespread illness, reflecting on human behaviour, societal responses and offering insights into the fragility of human civilization and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of disease. Examining the historical background of plague literature is crucial for understanding how these narratives have evolved over time, reflecting the changing social, cultural, and scientific contexts in which they were written. This genre of literature includes different forms, from novels, poems to plays and articles.

Plague was responsible for widespread pandemics with high mortality. "The great mortality of 1348-1350 was also wide ranging in its geographical incidence. It affected every country and region in Europe" (Aberth 22), it was known as the "Black Death" during the fourteenth century which caused more than 20 million deaths in Europe. The Black Death brought profound social and economic revolts. With labour shortages resulting from mass mortality, wages rose, and traditional feudal structures faltered (71). The sudden loss of skilled workers disrupted industries and commerce, leading to economic turmoil.

In the face of the Black Death, medieval societies grappled with fear and uncertainty. Desperate measures such as quarantine, flagellation, and religious processions were employed, but their effectiveness was limited as stated in the book *The Black Death, The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* by

John Aberth: "Many towns embraced plague-control measures, such as quarantine, even when these conflicted with religious responses" (80). The plague relentless spread defied comprehension and challenged the prevailing religious and medical beliefs of the time. Despite the devastation it wrought, the Black Death resulted significant changes. It accelerated the decline of the medieval period and paved the way for the Renaissance.

The trauma of the plague influenced art, literature, and religious practices, leaving an indelible mark on European culture. Moreover, it catalyzed advancements in medical knowledge and public health measures, laying the groundwork for modern epidemiology and sanitation practices. Some of the great works of that time include Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (1349-1353) which stands as a seminal work, offering a series of tales narrated by a group of young Florentines who have fled to escape the Black Death. Through their stories, Boccaccio explores themes of mortality, social upheaval, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of catastrophic circumstances. Other works include the Italian scholar, poet, and one of the earliest humanists Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch, who lived through the period of the Black Death and wrote extensively about its impact. He expressed his despair and grief over the loss of friends and the devastation caused by the plague.

The repeated outbreaks of plague during the Renaissance and early modern eras had a profound impact that was chronicled vividly through the writings and literature of the period. The most catastrophic was the Bubonic Plague pandemic known as the Black Death, which struck Europe in the late 1340s. In later centuries, the plague continued to strike cities like Florence. "The ever-higher estimates of plague mortality, and the uncovering of much economic disruption and upheaval on manors behind the facade of recovery, have only added to the importance of the Black Death as an event of great

historical significance" (Aberth 9), the social upheaval extended far beyond the immense death toll, trade and business stagnated as people fled cities. Poems and plays expressed the constant fear of mortality. The writings captured the profound dread, moral questions, and human resilience in facing repeated waves of the deadliest pandemic mankind had encountered.

Despite the developments in technology and medicine, health crises and epidemics remain an enduring influence in many literary works. The 19th and early 20th centuries were not only significant for their medical and public health developments but also for their rich literary responses to the numerous epidemics that swept through societies. Literature from this period often reflects the profound impact of these health crises on individual lives and communities. For instance, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) is a chilling allegory about the inevitability of death, inspired by the numerous cholera and tuberculosis outbreaks of the time. Similarly, Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* (1912) poignantly captures the existential despair and the seductive yet destructive allure of beauty against the backdrop of a cholera epidemic.

The recurring cholera pandemics profoundly influenced Victorian literature, with Charles Dickens highlighting the deplorable sanitation conditions and their deadly consequences in works like *Bleak House* (1853). The Russian flu pandemic of 1889-1890, though less frequently depicted, echoes in the pervasive sense of fragility in Anton Chekhov's plays and stories. The Spanish flu of 1918-1919, one of the deadliest pandemics, found its way into various narratives, notably in Katherine Anne Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1939), which offers a deeply personal account of the pandemic's impact. Literature from this era not only documented the harrowing effects of these epidemics but also explored broader themes of mortality, societal collapse, and the

human condition, providing future generations with both a historical record and a source of enduring artistic insight.

The 20th century saw the emergence of a powerful body of "plague literature" as writers confronted the profound personal traumas and societal upheavals wrought by epidemics. The HIV/AIDS pandemic, in particular, inspired a wave of memoirs and autobiographical accounts that vividly captured the lived realities of those affected. In addition to personal narratives, many writers turned to speculative fiction to explore epidemics as allegories for broader existential crises and societal issues. Inspired by Albert Camus' seminal work *The Plague*, which uses a bubonic plague as a metaphor for human suffering, contemporary authors employed similar themes to reflect on the HIV/AIDS epidemic and other societal ills.

José Saramago's 1997 novel *Blindness* is a renowned work of literature that explores the themes of societal breakdown and human resilience in the face of a mysterious epidemic of blindness. The novel imagines a society where people suddenly lose their sight and are quarantined in horrific conditions, revealing both the darkest and most compassionate aspects of human nature. "*Blindness*" has been highly acclaimed for its allegorical depth and poignant commentary on the human condition. These audacious works of literature add searing emotional depth to the canon, capturing the trials and tribulations of humanity in the face of devastating plagues throughout the 20th century.

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a global public health crisis on a scale not seen in over a century. Writers have channelled the shared experience into a new era of plague literature, offering critical perspectives on the vulnerabilities exposed by the virus. Ed Yong's article "How the Pandemic Defeated America", critically examines the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic, reflecting widespread frustration with leadership

and public health strategies. Lawrence Wright's book *The Plague Year: America in the Time of Covid* explores the pandemic's intimate impacts, from family relationships to mental health struggles caused by isolation and loss. Wright details how grief could not be shared, leaving people isolated and struggling with a sense of permanent sadness. The devastation and lessons from COVID-19 will be inscribed in humanity's plague literature canon, capturing both the trauma and resilience summoned during this generational crisis.

2. Major Concerns in Plague Literature:

Plague literature often highlights the fragility of human life. The rapid spread of disease starkly reveals our vulnerability and how quickly death and suffering can become commonplace. Authors like Albert Camus and Nagel depict how plagues strip away any sentimentality about the preciousness of life. In this regard, Nagel states “There does not appear to be any conceivable world (containing us) about which unshakable doubts could not arise. Consequently, the absurdity of our situation derives not from a collision between our expectations and the world, but from a collision within ourselves (722). In other words, the absurdity of our situation arises not merely from the external world's failure to meet our expectations, but from an internal collision of our own contradictory thoughts and desires. In any conceivable scenario where humans exist, we are bound to encounter uncertainties and unresolved questions.

In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus states that “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world (Camus32). For Camus, as for Nagel, human fragility is underscored by the inherent conflict within ourselves when we confront the absurdity of existence. Nagel suggests that doubts about our place in the world persist regardless of circumstances, emphasizing the internal collision that generates absurdity. Similarly, Camus depicts the absurd as emerging from

the clash between our innate need for meaning and the indifferent silence of the universe, echoing the theme of human vulnerability in the face of existential uncertainty.

Plagues expose societal fractures and injustices, leading to a breakdown of ethics and order. Indeed, “The fear of contagion increased vices such as avarice, greed, and corruption, which paradoxically led to infection and thus to both moral and physical death” (Riva et al.1753). This suggests that during times of heightened fear of contagion, negative traits like greed and corruption become more prevalent. Paradoxically, these vices contribute to the spread of infection, leading to both moral decay and physical harm. These prominent themes reflect how societies respond to the existential threat posed by widespread disease in a way it portrays the social order, the ethical norms, and the human behaviour under the extreme stress of a plague. Examples of these themes can be seen in works like Albert Camus' *The Plague*, which examines how a fictional Algerian town's residents respond to a devastating epidemic, revealing both the best and worst in human nature. Similarly, Giovanni Boccaccio's "*The Decameron*" portrays the moral and social consequences of the Black Death in 14th-century Florence, including both the breakdown of social order and moments of moral clarity.

In the bleakest moments, plague literature explores philosophical questions about life, suffering, and human nature. To this effect, Camus states: “In a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world.” (6). Authors like Camus question the meaning of life portraying outbreaks and the chaos that ensues “I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know that something in it has a meaning and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one” (28). Camus believes that the world lacks inherent ultimate meaning, yet he acknowledges the significance of humanity in attributing meaning to existence. Humans, uniquely

driven to seek meaning, imbue the world with significance despite its apparent lack of inherent purpose.

Many plague narratives are rooted in firsthand, journalistic depictions of the disease's impact on communities. Camus's *The Plague* uses diaristic specificity and a pragmatic tone to lend authenticity to their accounts." On April 28, when the Ransdoc Bureau announced that 8,000 rats had been collected, a wave of something like panic swept the town "(Camus.8). The quote exemplifies how plague literature often employs journalistic realism and a sense of immediacy akin to first-person accounts. By specifying the exact date and the precise number of rats collected, the narrative mirrors the factual, detailed style of journalism, which adds authenticity and credibility. This detailed recounting of events, characteristic of first-person narratives, immerses the reader in the unfolding crisis, effectively conveying the atmosphere of panic that grips the town. The precise information and straightforward presentation create a realistic portrayal of the situation, making the reader feel as if they are witnessing the events firsthand.

Isolation and quarantine are common devices, allowing writers to explore the psychological tolls of seclusion. In *The Plague*, quarantine becomes a lens for examining existential loneliness and the human response to catastrophe. Reflecting on existential solitude, one is struck by the poignant observation that "Thus each of us had to be content to lie only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky" Camus.75). The quote encapsulates the sense of isolation and existential loneliness experienced by the characters in *The Plague* during their time in quarantine. Each person is forced to confront their own mortality and the vast indifference of the universe as they grapple with the uncertainty of their situation. The image of lying alone under the vast indifference of the sky evokes a feeling of insignificance and isolation, highlighting the existential

struggle to find meaning and connection in a world that seems indifferent to their suffering. This sense of existential loneliness is intensified by the physical separation imposed by quarantine, as individuals are cut off from their usual social networks and left to confront their own existential questions in solitude.

3. Conspiracy Theory: Theoretical Grounding

The study of the conspiracy theory has become an interesting field of research in modern academic studies. However, it cannot be explored only if it has been conceptualized and defined. A conspiracy and a conspiracy theory, though related, refer to distinct concepts with important differences. To understand these differences, we must first examine the definitions of each term from authoritative sources. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a conspiracy as "a secret plan by a group to do something unlawful or harmful; the action of plotting or conspiring." Similarly, the Cambridge English Dictionary states that a conspiracy is "the act of secretly planning to do something illegal or harmful." These definitions depict the key elements of a conspiracy as a group of individuals, secrecy, and the intention to carry out an unlawful or harmful act.

On the other hand, the Oxford English Dictionary defines a conspiracy theory as "a belief that some covert but influential organization is responsible for a circumstance or event." The Cambridge English Dictionary offers a similar definition: "a belief that an event or situation is the result of a secret plan made by powerful people or groups." Unlike a conspiracy, which refers to the actual secret plan itself, a conspiracy theory is a speculative belief or explanation that such a conspiracy exists, often without substantial evidence to support it.

Sunstein, Cass R. and Adrian Vermeule go further in describing a conspiracy theory as "an effort to explain some event or practice by reference to the machinations of powerful people, who attempt to conceal their role (at least until their aims are accomplished)"(205). This emphasizes that conspiracy theories often explain events by attributing them to the secret actions of powerful individuals or groups who hide their involvement until their goals are achieved.

One of the critical distinctions between a conspiracy and a conspiracy theory lies in the element of proof or substantiation. A conspiracy refers to a proven, factual event involving a covert plan or agreement, while a conspiracy theory is an unsubstantiated belief or hypothesis about such a conspiracy, lacking robust evidence to support its claims. Historically, there have been instances of genuine conspiracies, such as the Watergate scandal or the Gunpowder Plot, where evidence of a secret, unlawful plan was uncovered and substantiated.

Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, often emerge in response to significant events or crises that are difficult to comprehend or accept. They offer simplistic explanations by attributing these events to the machinations of powerful, influential groups, such as governments, corporations, or secret societies. However, these theories frequently lack rigorous evidence and rely on circumstantial claims, speculation, and a tendency to reinterpret any contradictory information as further proof of the alleged conspiracy.

Butter and Knight support the claim about conspiracy theories emerging in response to significant events or crises and offering simplistic explanations by attributing events to powerful groups. They claim that "Various major crisis events have taken place in recent history, and these events have inspired substantial conspiracy theorizing." (1).

In their book *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theories*, they state that major crisis events have given rise to conspiracy theories, supporting the idea that they emerge in response to significant events or crises." They assume that everything has been planned and nothing happens by coincidence; they divide the world strictly into the evil conspirators and the innocent victims of their plot; and they claim that the conspiracy works in secret and does not reveal itself even after it has reached its goals" (1). This indicates that conspiracy theories attribute events to the secret, deliberate planning of "evil conspirators," which aligns with the claim that they offer simplistic explanations by attributing events to the machinations of powerful influential groups.

While it does not explicitly depict the lack of rigorous evidence or the tendency to reinterpret contradictory information, it does suggest a speculative nature of conspiracy theories (1). As the same authors argue, "According to historian Geoffrey Cubitt, conspiracy theories are a way of making sense of current events and the grand sweep of history that is characterized by intentionalism, dualism and occultism." He attributes socio-political phenomena to deliberate actions with hidden malice such as dualism and occultism.

It is important to note that the existence of a conspiracy theory does not necessarily imply the existence of an actual conspiracy. While some conspiracy theories may eventually be proven true, many remain unsubstantiated and persist due to various psychological and social factors, such as the human desire for meaning and order, distrust of authorities, or the appeal of empowerment in the face of perceived powerlessness.

Therefore, a conspiracy refers to a proven, covert plan by a group to carry out an unlawful or harmful act, while a conspiracy theory is a speculative belief or explanation

that such a conspiracy exists, often lacking substantial evidence. The key distinction lies in the substantiation of evidence: a conspiracy is a factual event, while a conspiracy theory is an unsubstantiated belief or hypothesis about a purported conspiracy. Thus, a conspiracy theory can be described as "a subset of false beliefs in which the ultimate cause of an event is believed to be due to a plot by multiple actors working together with a clear goal in mind, often unlawfully and in secret" (Swami et al.220). This explains it theory as a subset of false beliefs in which a major event is believed to be the result of multiple actors unlawfully and secretly working together in a coordinated plot with a clear goal in mind, rather than being due to unintentional or accidental causes.

From centuries earlier, the allure to the conspiracy theories and thinking occur at time of crisis when people and societies face difficulties in understanding unexplained, or hard to understand advents. This belief is a result of psychological reactions supported by many scholars as related paranoia. The roots of the emergence of this conspiratory belief are centuries old. However, Usinky-Joseph.E states that " there is no time in recorded history without conspiracy theories, Whether we are examining accounts of ancient Rome, Medieval Europe, or twentieth century America"(1). In other words, conspiracy theories have existed throughout history; they emerge from societal uncertainties and the human desire for hidden explanations of complex events, highlighting a persistent aspect of human nature.

The belief in conspiracy theories is a phenomenon that has permeated human societies across cultures and throughout history. While the specific narratives may vary, the underlying impulse to seek out hidden explanations for significant events and crises appears to be a universal aspect of the human experience. As Michael Butter and Peter Knight note in their review of conspiracy theory research, "Today conspiracy theories

exist in all cultures and societies, While there are precursors in antiquity, there is evidence that their modern form emerged during the transition from the Early Modern period to the Enlightenment." (33). They suggest that while conspiracy theories have ancient roots, their modern incarnation began to take shape during the transition from the Early Modern era to the Enlightenment, a period of profound societal upheaval and intellectual awakening. The rise of scientific rationalism and the questioning of traditional authorities may have contributed to a heightened sense of distrust and a desire to uncover hidden forces at work behind the veil of official narratives.

However, the prevalence of conspiracy theories has not been constant throughout history. As Jan-Willem van Prooijen and Karen M. Douglas observe in their article "Conspiracy theories as part of history: The role of societal crisis situations," there have been distinct spikes in conspiracy theorizing:

If anything, there were two spikes in the data suggesting increased conspiratorial content; however, these spikes were not in the current decade. The first spike occurred shortly before the year 1900, at the height of the second industrial revolution—a period that was characterized by the rise of major companies, quick technological progress, and rapidly changing power structures. (Van Prooijen325)

In other words, the rapid technological advancements and shift in power dynamics have fueled the rise of conspiracy theories as a way to explain the sudden societal changes.

According to what has been said, conspiracy theories saw an increase in prevalence around the turn of the 20th century, during a time of significant societal and industrial changes. The rapid pace of technological progress and the shifting power dynamics brought about by the rise of large corporations likely created a sense of

uncertainty and distrust, fueling conspiracy theories as a means of making sense of these transformative forces.

The authors go on to identify another spike in conspiracy theorizing: "The second spike occurred during the late 1940s and the early 1950s—a period that marked the beginning of the Cold War. Many of the conspiracy theories that were ventilated during that period assumed an association between groups or institutions with communism" (Van Prooijen324). The onset of the Cold War, with its climate of ideological tensions and the perceived threat of communist infiltration, provided fertile ground for conspiracy theories targeting alleged communist sympathizers and organizations. The infamous McCarthy era in the United States exemplified this trend, as unfounded allegations of communist conspiracies swept through the nation, ruining careers and lives in the process.

These spikes in conspiracy theorizing highlight a recurring pattern: times of significant societal upheaval, uncertainty, and perceived threats often give rise to heightened levels of conspiracy theorizing. As Van Prooijen and Douglas note:

Various major crisis events have taken place in recent history, and these events have inspired substantial conspiracy theorizing. Only recently, the world has seen economic and financial crises, which have been associated with various conspiracy theories (e.g. the theory that the financial crisis was caused by democratic bankers to get Obama elected in 2008). (Van Prooijen325)

The global financial crisis of 2008 and its far-reaching economic consequences provided a contemporary example of how major crises can fuel the proliferation of conspiracy theories, as people sought to make sense of the complex forces at play and assign blame to perceived malicious actors.

Conspiracy theories, however, are not solely a modern phenomenon. As the authors note:

Even back in the Roman era, there are prominent examples of conspiracy theories, and these are typically connected to major crisis situations. During the year AD 64, the great fire of Rome erupted... Around the same time, however, conspiracy theories started to spread, which asserted that Nero and his associates deliberately started the fire in order to rebuild Rome according to his own vision. (326)

This historical narrative illustrates how conspiracy theories have been present throughout human history, often emerging in response to major crises or events that challenge existing narratives and understandings. The devastating fire that ravaged Rome in 64 AD gave rise to theories alleging that Emperor Nero himself had orchestrated the disaster for his own purposes, reflecting the human tendency to seek out hidden explanations for significant events, particularly in times of upheaval and uncertainty.

Through these examples and insights, it becomes clear that conspiracy theories are not a modern aberration but rather a deeply ingrained aspect of human psychology and culture. While their specific forms and targets may shift over time, the underlying impulse to seek out hidden narratives and attribute significant events to the machinations of powerful, malicious forces has persisted across cultures and throughout history. As the quote states, "Today conspiracy theories exist in all cultures and societies. While there are precursors in antiquity, there is evidence that their modern form emerged during the transition from the Early Modern period to the Enlightenment" (Butter and Knight 33). It highlights the enduring nature of conspiracy theories, adapting and taking root in response to the changing social and intellectual landscapes. Whether in response to societal upheaval, perceived threats, or major crises; conspiracy theories have served as a

means of making sense of the complex and often unsettling realities that humans have grappled with throughout the ages.

4. Bioterrorism and Transhumanism in Literature:

According to the Public Med Central (PMC), Bioterrorism is the intentional release or threat of release of biologic agents (i.e. viruses, bacteria, fungi or their toxins) in order to cause disease or death among human population or food crops and livestock to terrorize a civilian population or manipulate the government (Das Kataria256). Bioterrorism attacks can target humans, animals, or plant life, aiming to disrupt social, economic, or political systems through fear, psychological distress, and mass casualties. The perpetrators of bioterrorism often seek to achieve specific ideological or political goals by exploiting the public's vulnerability to biological threats. Bioterrorism has emerged as a chilling theme in literature, reflecting anxieties about the potential misuse of biological agents. These narratives explore the devastating consequences of such attacks, often sparking debates about biosecurity and human vulnerability.

The early depictions were one of the earliest fictional portrayals of bioterrorism can be found in H.G. Wells' short story *The Stolen Bacillus* (1894), which features a scientist accidentally unleashing a deadly disease. Concerning modern narratives, more recent bioterrorism novels often delve into the complexities of a bioterror attack, depicting the race to identify the pathogen, the struggles of overwhelmed healthcare systems, and the societal collapse that can ensue.

Bioterrorism thrillers can serve as social commentary, raising concerns about bioweapons proliferation, the ease of obtaining deadly pathogens, and the need for international cooperation to prevent such attacks. “These are the new Dark Ages. Centuries ago, Europe was in the depths of its own misery—the population huddled [...]and when it does, nothing on earth will be able to stop it”(Brown 46-47).The quote reflects social commentary by comparing contemporary society to Europe's Dark Ages, suggesting both periods are marked by suffering and moral decline. It uses the metaphor of a forest suffocated by deadwood to imply that outdated societal structures must be purged for new growth. The passage argues that catastrophic events, like the Black Death, are necessary for societal renewal, implying that suffering precedes positive change. Criticism of conservative figures highlights a lack of understanding about future challenges, and the imagery of an impending inferno warns that

Bioterrorism narratives have adapted to reflect changing anxieties. Early stories often focused on accidental releases, while contemporary works explore bioterrorism as a deliberate weapon wielded by terrorists or rogue states. One notable work where a virus is released accidentally in the context of bioterrorism is Richard Preston's *The Cobra Event*. In this novel, a genetically engineered virus is accidentally released in New York City, causing a deadly outbreak. The story follows the efforts of medical professionals and government agencies to contain the virus and prevent further devastation. In contrast, the release of the virus in Dan Brown's *inferno* was deliberate. Zobrist's solution was to engineer a virus called "Inferno" that would dramatically reduce the world's population by causing infertility. He intended for the virus to spread globally, leading to a significant decrease in birth rates and ultimately stabilizing the human population at a sustainable level.

Beyond the physical devastation, bioterrorism narratives explore the profound psychological impact of such attacks. Stories depict the fear, paranoia, and social disruption that can tear at the fabric of society. In *"The Hot Zone"*, the quote "Bill Volt hovered in the room, almost shaking with fear. Volt was not doing well—almost spastic in his terror" (Preston 215), vividly illustrates the intense psychological impact of dealing with a deadly virus. Bill Volt's visible physical manifestations of fear—hovering indecisively and shaking—highlight the profound anxiety and terror gripping him. The phrase "almost spastic in his terror" underscores the severity of his psychological state, suggesting that his fear is so overwhelming it nearly causes him to lose physical control. This depiction underscores the immense mental toll faced by individuals working with lethal pathogens, where the fear of infection and the high stakes involved create an environment of extreme stress. Volt's reaction exemplifies how the constant threat of the virus and the prospect of death can push individuals to the brink of psychological breakdown, impacting both their mental and physical well-being.

Several notable works have delved into the terrifying realm of bioterrorism and deadly pandemics. Michael Crichton's *The Andromeda Strain* immerses readers in a race against time as scientists endeavor to contain an extraterrestrial microorganism threatening humanity. Dean Koontz's *The Eyes of Darkness* unfolds a gripping narrative of a bioengineered supervirus escaping from a secretive government lab, prompting a global crisis that protagonists must urgently confront. Richard Preston's nonfiction account, *The Hot Zone*, provides a chilling exploration of the Ebola virus, examining its origins, potential as a bioweapon, and the relentless efforts to contain its deadly outbreaks. Margaret Atwood's dystopian masterpiece, *Oryx and Crake*, paints a haunting portrait of a world devastated by a bioengineered pandemic, following the lone survivor as he navigates a genetically-altered landscape shaped by bioterrorism and human folly.

Together, these works offer a profound reflection on the catastrophic implications and ethical complexities of biological warfare and engineered diseases.

4.1. Transhumanism Between Utopian and Dystopian Narratives

Transhumanism is a philosophical and intellectual movement that advocates the use of new technologies to enhance human abilities and overcome limitations. Proponents believe that these technologies can improve our lifespan, health, cognition, and senses. They envision a future where humanity transcends its current state and becomes something entirely new and post-human. However, this complex and controversial movement raises a number of ethical questions, such as who would have access to these new technologies, and what it would mean to be human in a world where humans are constantly being augmented.

Science fiction literature has extensively explored the concept of transhumanism, presenting both utopian and dystopian visions. On one hand, transhumanist literature envisions utopian societies where technology enables humans to surpass current limitations. Enhanced lifespans, augmented cognition, and seamless integration with machines are celebrated as pathways to a brighter future for humanity. Conversely, these narratives also delve into the potential pitfalls of transhumanism. Dystopian scenarios caution against a future marred by technological inequality, where only the affluent can afford enhancements, exacerbating societal divides. Such stories provoke ethical debates

about control over technology and challenge our understanding of humanity amid the pursuit of enhancement, questioning the essence of what it means to be human.

A common theme in transhumanism is the blurring lines between human and machine. Stories explore characters with cybernetic implants or consciousness uploads, raising philosophical questions about identity and what constitutes a person. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* By Philip K. Dick effectively explores the blurred lines between humans and machines through its profound philosophical inquiries into identity, humanity, and consciousness. The novel follows Rick Deckard, a bounty hunter tasked with "retiring" rogue androids, or replicants, that are virtually indistinguishable from humans. These replicants possess memories and emotions that challenge the notion of what defines a human being. The story delves into empathy as a uniquely human trait, using the Voight-Kampff test to measure emotional responses and differentiate humans from androids. This blurring of lines between human and machine, challenges the traditional understandings of morality and personhood, and raises existential questions about consciousness and what it means to be alive. Philip K. Dick's work remains a seminal exploration of these themes within the science fiction genre.

Transhumanist narratives often feature characters that embody the potential of transhumanism. These heroes might have enhanced strength, intelligence, or technological symbiosis. On the other hand, some stories portray super-villains who use transhumanist technology for nefarious purposes, highlighting the potential dangers. This can be seen in *Inferno* by Dan Brown (2013). On one hand, Robert Langdon, the protagonist of the novel, embodies aspects of a Transhumanist Hero through his intellectual prowess and his ability to solve complex puzzles and unravel intricate mysteries. While he doesn't possess overt transhuman enhancements, his intelligence and

knowledge represent a form of enhanced human capability. Langdon's quest to stop the release of a deadly virus can be interpreted as a heroic endeavor to prevent the misuse of transhumanist technology (in this case, a genetically engineered plague) for nefarious purposes. His actions align with the theme of heroes who strive to protect humanity from the dangers posed by unchecked technological advancements.

On the other hand, Bertrand Zobrist, the antagonist of the novel, can be seen as a Transhumanist Super-villain due to his radical beliefs and actions regarding transhumanism. Zobrist seeks to use transhumanist technology, specifically genetic engineering, to control human population growth through the release of a deadly virus. Zobrist's plan to unleash the virus reflects the dangers associated with the misuse of transhumanist technology for malevolent purposes. His actions highlight the potential consequences of allowing individuals with extremist ideologies to wield advanced biotechnological tools without ethical oversight.

At its core, transhumanism raises profound questions about what it means to be human. Can we enhance ourselves without losing our essential nature? What does it mean to be alive in a world where biological limitations are transcended? These existential questions are a driving force in much transhumanist fiction. In *Oryx and Crake*, Margaret Atwood says

Each one of us must tread the path laid out before him, or her, says the voice in his head, a man's this time, the style bogus guru, and each path is unique. It is not the nature of the path itself that should concern the seeker, but the grace and strength and patience with which each and every one of us follows the sometimes challenging. (16)

The quote touches on existential themes, particularly the idea of individual paths and the qualities one brings to their journey. It suggests that each person's path is unique and that what matters most is how one navigates their own journey, regardless of its nature or challenges. The emphasis on "grace and strength and patience" highlights the importance of personal resilience and character in facing life's trials. This reflection aligns with existential inquiries about the meaning of life, personal identity, and the choices individuals make in response to their circumstances.

Several notable works have incorporated themes of transhumanism, exploring both its promises and perils. Mary Shelley's classic novel *Frankenstein* serves as a foundational text, delving into the dangers of scientific ambition and ethical dilemmas surrounding the creation of life. It touches on early themes of transhumanism through Victor Frankenstein's creation of the monster, which challenges notions of humanity and existence. Frank Herbert's *Dune* introduces a complex universe where characters extend their lives and enhance their abilities through the use of "spice," a substance that grants extraordinary mental and physical prowess.

Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* portrays a future where human consciousness can be transferred into new bodies, challenging conventional notions of mortality, identity, and the essence of being human. It probes into the ramifications of digital immortality and the existential questions raised by such technological advancements. Together, these works weave a tapestry of narratives that contemplate the transformative potential of technology on humanity, while also cautioning against its ethical and existential pitfalls. They provoke reflection on what it means to be human in an age where scientific innovation blurs the lines between natural and artificial, mortality and immortality.

5. New Historicism: A Theoretical Overview

New Historicism is a literary theory and critical approach that emerged in the late 20th century, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. It focuses on the intersection between literature and history, emphasizing the idea that literary texts are not just isolated works of art but rather are embedded within and influenced by the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts in which they were produced. It is a theory that seeks to understand and analyze literary texts by examining the historical and cultural conditions in which they were created. It rejects the idea of literature as a timeless and universal form of expression, instead viewing it as a product of specific historical moments shaped by power dynamics, social structures, and ideological conflicts. Thus, to understand a literary text, critics need to first understand the author's background and the cultural context in which the work was produced.

New Historicism was developed from the ideas of various scholars, however, the literary critic and Professor Stephen Greenblatt is most closely associated with this theory. Greenblatt's 1980 book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* is considered a foundational text that established core principles of New Historicism. In this seminal work and his subsequent writings, Greenblatt explored how literature related to and was influenced by the society of its era. He analyzed Renaissance texts by situating them within their specific historical contexts and circumstances. Greenblatt shed light on the ways literary works both reflected and were shaped by the social, political, and cultural forces present when they were produced. His New Historicist approach revealed intricate connections between the written word and the wider world in which authors lived and created. Fredric Jameson is another well-known New Historicist. Jameson is famous for his “always historicize!” which is mentioned at the very beginning

of the preface of his work *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981) commanding literary critics to pay attention to the social and historical context in which a work was produced.

Another noteworthy New Historicist is Alan Liu, a prominent literary scholar who has made significant contributions to the theory of new historicism. His work emphasizes understanding literary texts within their broader historical and cultural contexts through an interdisciplinary approach that incorporates insights from fields like history, sociology, and cultural studies. Liu has been instrumental in exploring the relationship between literature and its cultural milieu, advocating for intertextuality and critical engagement with issues of race, ethnicity, and identity. Additionally, he has pioneered the integration of digital humanities and new media perspectives into literary analysis, reshaping academic practices and knowledge production in the field.

Michel Foucault is another prominent and highly influential French philosopher whose work had a major impact on the development of new historicism. Foucault's concepts like discourse, power/knowledge, and his archaeological and genealogical methods provided new ways of analyzing how power relations shape and are shaped by different knowledges and cultural institutions across history. His ideas about examining the dispersed events, marginal viewpoints, and subjugated knowledges that underlie accepted historical narratives aligned with new historicism's aims to recover suppressed voices and contexts behind literary texts. Foucault's theorizing of power's productive and regulatory functions across domains like asylums, prisons and sexuality revealed how literary and cultural products emerge from and reinforce broader systems of social control. His work inspired new historicists to read literary works as symbiotic with their historical circumstances.

New Historicism closely examines how power operates within societies and is reflected, contested, and negotiated in literary texts. It explores the inextricable link between power and knowledge, as theorized by Michel Foucault in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (1969). Foucault argues in the introduction as well as throughout the whole book that knowledge is not neutral, but shaped by the power relations and dominant ideologies within a society. Ruling groups control what constitutes "truth" and "valid" knowledge, reinforcing their own authority. Foucault introduced the concept of "discourse" as the means by which knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized through rules governing what can be expressed within a given historical context. These discourses construct objects of knowledge and are practices enmeshed in power relations; as stated "We shall call discourse a group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation" (Foucault 117). For Foucault, knowledge and power are intertwined, with discourses acting as the mechanisms joining them.

New Historicism therefore analyzes how literary works both reflect and influence dominant ideological discourses that shape accepted knowledge and marginalize alternative perspectives. It unpacks the power dynamics underlying the construction of truth and meaning in texts. It emphasizes the importance of understanding literary texts in relation to the historical contexts in which they were produced. It seeks to uncover the social, cultural, political, and economic forces that shape both the creation of texts and their reception by readers.

New Historicism views texts as cultural artefacts that participate in broader discourses and networks of meaning. It analyzes the language, imagery, and narrative strategies used in literary texts to uncover the underlying ideologies and cultural norms

embedded within them. It also intertwines literary texts with broader cultural forms like historical documents, political speeches, visual art, and popular media, analyzing their intertextual connections and mutual influences to elucidate the cultural milieu of specific historical epochs. This critical approach rejects the notion of a singular, fixed interpretation of literature, embracing instead the recognition of multiple and contingent meanings shaped by diverse perspectives, biases, and historical contexts. Authors and readers contribute to the ongoing negotiation of interpretations within evolving societal frameworks. Moreover, influenced by Michel Foucault's examination of disciplinary institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and schools, New Historicism explores how literature reflects and critiques the mechanisms of surveillance, normalization, and social control inherent in these modern institutions. By scrutinizing these power structures embedded in societal practices, New Historicist readings illuminate literature's role in both reflecting and challenging dominant ideologies and power dynamics.

Conclusion:

As a conclusion, this theoretical chapter has brought together several important areas: plague literature, conspiracy theory analysis, examination of bioterrorism and transhumanism concepts, and the contextualizing lens of New Historicism theory. Combining these different threads provides a well-rounded interpretive framework for understanding how literary works across eras have deeply explored key issues facing the human experience. The visceral plague narratives offer insights into human vulnerability, social upheaval during crises, mortality, and the search for meaning amidst devastation. The analysis of conspiracy theories sheds light on psychological factors like paranoia, distrust of authorities, and the desire to find order in chaotic events. Perspectives on bioterrorism and transhumanist potentials further this by probing the profound moral

quandaries of humanity's newfound abilities to manipulate biology itself and push beyond biological constraints.

Unifying these different domains, New Historicism situates literary works as embedded within their specific historical contexts and matrices of power relations, politics, and ideological forces. This overarching historical view allows for deeper comprehension of how literature both reflects and shapes the socio-cultural realities of its era. Through synthesizing these varied lenses, new understandings emerge regarding the timeless and universal human struggles that resonate so profoundly across the literary canon. Literature's enduring capacity to dissect the most fundamental human questions and circumstances is reaffirmed.

Chapter Two:

Examining Health Crisis Narratives: Vaccine Hesitancy, Bioterrorism, and Conspiracy Theories in Modern Pandemics

Introduction:

Dan Brown's *Inferno* (2013) transcends its surface narrative of a thrilling adventure to function as a profound exploration of contemporary anxieties, particularly those magnified by the reality of global pandemics. This dissertation employs the critical framework of New Historicism to deconstruct the novel revealing its complex reflections on conspiracy, power dynamics, and the fluidity of truth. New Historicism, as posited by Stephen Greenblatt, asserts that texts are inextricably linked to the socio-political forces of their time, simultaneously shaping and being shaped by these forces.

Inferno was conceived against the backdrop of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, embedding within its narrative the pervasive fears of viral outbreaks. This context resonates powerfully in the post-COVID-19 era, where the novel's themes of a bio-engineered virus as a tool of control evoke real-world concerns about health threats and institutional trust. By examining these themes through New Historicism, this study highlights how the story mirrors and critiques the manipulation of knowledge and power, reflecting the pervasive distrust and conspiracy theories that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Through this analysis, the chapter aims to provide a comprehensive insight of how *Inferno* functions as a cultural artifact that both reflects and critiques the anxieties of its time which offers a cautionary tale about the manipulation of knowledge and the complexities of navigating truth in an era of rapid scientific advancement and pervasive misinformation. This chapter aims to discuss Brown's novel in relation to conspiracy theory and COVID-19. It explores the similarities between the novel and the actual pandemic of COVID-19, focusing on bioterrorism.

1. Bridging Fiction and Reality: The Reflection of Post-Pandemic Health Crisis through Conspiracy Theories in *Inferno*

New Historicism emphasizes the inseparability of text and context, recognizing that literature is not merely a reflection of its time but a product of the social, political, and intellectual forces that shape it. Stephen Greenblatt argues that texts are not autonomous but are constituted by and constitutive of the social and political forces that surround them (06). *Inferno* was written in the shadow of the 2009 H1N1 pandemic, a global health crisis that brought anxieties surrounding viral outbreaks to the forefront. This context is woven into the very fabric of the novel, particularly in the portrayal of a fictional virus, *Inferno*, as a reflection of the real-world anxieties concerning global health threats. Sienna Brooks explains in chapter 41 to Professor Langdon that " Zobrist has publicly predicted that the human race will not survive another centuryunless we have some kind of mass extinction event"(Inferno 145). Sienna's direct quote unveils the nature of Zobrist and his powerful knowledge background as it exemplifies the hidden truth of predicting the future threats .Her mention of a "mass extinction event" as a potential solution hints at conspiracy theories involving planned population reduction by powerful entities represented as Zobrist .To confirm that , Sienna continues to tell Longdon about Zobrist in the following " In fact , Zobrist was once quoted as saying that ' the best thing that ever happened to Europe was the Black Death.' "(145). This fictional explanation reflects the real world concerns related to conspiracy theories that say governments , rich people, or powerful entities plan to reduce human population to solve problems like overpopulation ,climate change or food shortages. These ideas often come from twisting historical events or misunderstanding science. For example, some claim that vaccines or chemicals in food are secret ways to control population. These theories spread fear and distrust, making people doubt official information about health and safety

capturing the pervasive fear of a world vulnerable to unseen enemies, a fear that has only intensified in the post-COVID-19 era.

The novel's conspiracy theory revolves around a powerful organization attempting to control the world's population through a bio-engineered virus, highlighting the insidious influence of power structures on ideology. The novel draws parallels with the Malthusian ideology, advocating for population control, to highlight the potential for those in power to manipulate knowledge for their own ends: "The virus is a weapon. It's a means of control. And the people who created it are the ones who will benefit from its release" (*Inferno*234). This passage reflects the anxieties surrounding the pharmaceutical industry and global institutions, echoing the pervasive distrust in institutions observed in the wake of COVID-19 and the rise of conspiracy theories alleging hidden agendas behind pandemic-related policies.

According to New Historicist pioneers, knowledge is never neutral, it is always embedded within power structures. The novel's plot hinges on the idea that knowledge is a potent weapon, capable of shaping the world and controlling populations. In chapter 38 of the novel, Dr. Sinskey describes Zobrist's exceptional intellect and scientific excellence and knowledge in his fields of science and engineering as. She says: "The bad news was that he was a genius in his field—a very dangerous person should he choose to be. Nothing is more creative ... nor destructive ... than a brilliant mind with a purpose." (137). This statement echoes Foucault's insights on the relationship between knowledge and power. We see Zobrist's knowledge becomes a form of power, potentially for creation (solving overpopulation) or destruction (releasing a deadly virus). Zobrist's scientific knowledge allows him to devise a plan for population control. This knowledge grants him a certain level of power. In essence, Dr. Sinskey's quote aligns with the idea of

double-edged sword of knowledge. A brilliant mind like Zobrist's can be a force for good, but when coupled with a destructive purpose, it can become incredibly dangerous. It also reflects the anxieties surrounding the rapid advancements in science and technology and the potential for their misuse. The novel highlights the real-world challenges of navigating misinformation and discerning truth from falsehood in a digital age, particularly concerning medical information and scientific breakthroughs.

Language, through the lens of this theory, is a form of power with discourses shaping human's understanding of the world. *Inferno* utilizes the trope of the "secret society," drawing upon the lexicon of conspiracy theories and apocalyptic literature, which resonates with real-world concerns around social control and the potential for societal collapse. The "tall man" , as presented in chapter 31 addresses Dr. Sinskey and the WHO as : "When the WHO published this graph, the world's politicians, power brokers, and environmentalists held emergency summits, all trying to assess which of these problems were most severe and which we could actually hope to solve. The outcome? Privately, they put their heads in their hands and wept. Publicly, they assured us all that they were working on solutions but that these are complex issues." (119) This quote depicts a world teetering on the brink of catastrophe. A WHO graph exposes dire global issues, sending leaders into panic. Publicly, they feign control, but privately, they're overwhelmed. This scenario hints at the novel's themes of hidden truths and global conspiracies. The novel's exploration of how conspiracies spread through the manipulation of language and symbols underscores the power of rhetoric to create and sustain ideologies, echoing the real-world impact of misinformation on public discourse around pandemics.

Furthermore, New Historicists argue that texts are never created in isolation but are always in dialogue with other texts. *Inferno* is richly woven with references to historical figures, literary works, and artistic masterpieces; Brown refers to Dante the

renowned Italian poet who also has a work labeled “Inferno.” In the following quote, Robert Langdon is trapped with Sienna Brooks, deciphering clues based on Dante's *Inferno* left by a villain obsessed with the poem. Here, Langdon emphasizes the poem's significance by saying to Sienna: "Dante's *Inferno* is more than just a poem. It's a map, a guidebook, a warning. It's a reflection of the human condition" (*Inferno*189). This quote transcends the context of the novel. Great literature, like Dante's "*Inferno*", becomes a roadmap for navigating our emotions, a guidebook on human behavior, and a cautionary tale about the pitfalls of choices. It reflects the universal human experience – our struggles, temptations, and potential for redemption. In our own lives, great literature can serve as a warning against real-world threats, be it the dangers of unchecked ambition, the consequences of societal ills, or the ever-present battle between good and evil. In this vein, Brown uses Dante as a reference to weave aspects of suspense and the clues that would lead to Zobrist's weapon. This intertextuality, particularly the use of Dante's *Inferno*, highlights the influence of cultural narratives on our perceptions of global crises, emphasizing the need for a critical examination of the stories we tell about ourselves and our place in the world.

New Historicism emphasizes the contingent nature of history and the multiplicity of perspectives. The novel's narrative is constructed as a puzzle, with Langdon and Sienna Brooks piecing together clues and interpretations. The novel itself offers no definitive solution or single truth, highlighting the complexity of the world and the multitude of interpretations that emerge from even seemingly straightforward events. As Langdon and Sienna uncover more clues and face increasing dangers, they come to grips with the massive scale of what's at stake. The pandemic virus, if released, could wipe out half the world's population. Despite their best efforts, the future remains uncertain - will they be able to stop the virus' release? Or will the population bomb go off with catastrophic

consequences? It's in this tense moment of not knowing what lies ahead that Sienna utters: "We can't predict the future, Robert. All we can do is try to understand the present and prepare for what may come" (352). She is reminding him that while they cannot predict or control future events with certainty, they must focus on understanding their present circumstances and taking whatever precautions they can to prepare. This ambiguity reflects the real-world complexities of pandemics, where scientific evidence is constantly evolving, and the narrative of the pandemic is shaped by a multitude of voices and perspectives.

Moreover, the role of disciplinary institutions in shaping power structures and knowledge production is a key tenant in the implemented theory. In *Inferno*, Zobrist's plan is facilitated by his influence over institutions, highlighting the potential for corruption and the misuse of power: "The world is governed by institutions, but these institutions are often controlled by individuals with their own agendas. This is the reality of power" (278). Therefore, it is necessary to examine how systems and institutions are established, particularly when confronted with complex and potentially dangerous events. The novel's exploration of corruption and the potential for malicious actors to influence scientific research and institutions resonates with real-world anxieties regarding the influence of lobbyists, special interests, and misinformation on scientific discourse.

Inferno serves as a powerful reminder of the complex relationship between fiction and reality, and the importance of critical engagement with the narratives that shape the modern world. Through the lens of New Historicism, the novel allows to deconstruct the narrative and examine its underlying themes of power, control, and the manipulation of knowledge, highlighting the ongoing anxieties surrounding pandemics, scientific advancement, and the pervasive distrust of institutions. It serves as a cautionary

tale, prompting the readers to reconsider human relationship with science, technology, and the institutions that govern their lives.

2. Deciphering Influence: *Inferno* Conspiracy Theory and Vaccine Hesitancy in the Post-Pandemic Era

Undoubtedly, art has the noble mission of raising awareness and informing people about the hidden secrets of the world. In this regard, Brown's work has been perceived as a warning about what is happening in the world. At the beginning of his novel *Inferno*, Brown states to his readers and referring to the following as fact that "All artwork, literature, science, and historical references in this novel are real" (12), and adds that "The Consortium" actually exists and has hidden itself and changed its name for secrecy purposes. This prompts the fact that people are unaware of many secrets which are, in fact, conspiracies made by the world's elite who claim their right to direct the world as they please.

Inferno's influence spread wide and it was even adapted as a movie in 2016; therefore, its influence encompassed a variety of audiences, taking into consideration that Hollywood's influence is global. As a result, the idea of conspiracy and apocalypse was rooted in the minds of people, and with the arrival of a real global pandemic, people became frenzied due to the deep engraved influence of conspiracy theory. Furthermore, Brown's assertion of the factuality of the components of his work stirs doubt and skepticism about the events of the world; Brown's work suggests that bioterrorism is real and mentioning that secret organizations exist in our world incurs a plethora of hypotheses about the dangers that are kept secretively from citizen population.

Michael Butter and Peter Knight note that the American culture promoted conspiracy narratives in factual genres; they add that conspiracy narrative texts follow a pattern of

presenting a heroic figure that plays the role of a detective unraveling the case and portraying aspects of skepticism toward everything and everyone (35-36). In the novel, Langdon manifests such aspects of conspiracy theory narratives wherein he appears paranoid toward everything, and mistrust heightens when he discovers that his companion, Dr. Brooks, is a traitor. Brown displays Langdon's paranoia by portraying his dream while he was in the hospital; the dream leads Langdon to become suspicious of everything wherein the woman in his dream whispers "Seek...And you shall find" (*Inferno*16). Langdon's dream is a clue that stirs suspense about him and his whereabouts.

Furthermore, the main threat in the novel is biotechnology which is made to sterilize one-third of the population. Biotechnology is "technology based on biology" it aims to develop technologies to help improve lives ("What is Biotechnology"). Brown's plot displays Zobrist's biotechnology as the evil that aims to destroy lives; however, from Zobrist's perspective, his aim is to save the planet from overpopulation. This approach to saving the planet contradicts people's freedom and rights, wherein they are put under a threatening reality they did not choose; the reality that would deprive them of having children.

Theories and attempts to save the world lead to a discussion on transhuman enhancement. Transhumanism is an international philosophical movement that aims to better the lives of human beings intellectually and physiologically through advanced technologies ("What is Transhumanism?"). Alexander Thomas claims that although transhumanism promotes a noble mission of human evolution, it has been fought because it could increase inequality and have horrendous consequences on the majority of humans. In this regard, Zobrist aims to make a better world through diminishing overpopulation which is damaging the planet's resources. This approach is highly linked

to the COVID pandemic because it accelerated the deaths of the population in an inexplicable way wherein people all over the world became engrossed in conspiracy theories during the crisis.

As a transhumanist, Zobrist aims to use biotechnology to save humanity by sterilizing one-third of the population without their consent; this raises the question of morality toward the goal of transhumanism and Zobrist specifically who chose to sacrifice people for the rest of the population. Zobrist has resorted to negative utilitarianism in accordance with a transhumanist approach to fix the issue of overpopulation (Saeed et al. 255). Zobrist found the solution to overpopulation, so it seemed to him that he acts as the hero, but from another perspective he is sacrificing one-third of the population.

The conspiracy theory in *Inferno* actually manifests in real life with the outbreak of COVID-19. The resemblance lies in the fact that *Inferno* and the world faced a global plague that is possibly man-made. Brown clearly displays the villain and his approach; however, the world was caught up in conspiracy narratives and related COVID-19 to a secret plan to control the world. Langdon's character comprised of distrust toward his surroundings, and the world as well felt distrust toward the government and institutions. The sentiment toward the pandemic was that of great skepticism toward everyone and everything. The entire world was collapsing because of the same virus that spread at an accelerating rate. People were put against an invisible enemy or enemies, so it was difficult to believe the instructions and give one's body to an uncertain cure which was claimed to be a recently made vaccine. People doubted the reliability of COVID-19 vaccines, which shows through the great hesitancy to take vaccines.

Marco Delmastro and Marinella Paciello relate people's belief in false narratives about a conspiracy to the mental state. They claim that "states of depression and sense of vulnerability can lead citizens not to fully perceive a new and complex phenomenon...Misinformation thus finds a fertile environment where COVID-19 is not properly understood" (3). Hence, it is explained that mental state causes such paranoia about global threats. Misinformation spreads and people become engrossed in the narratives of conspiracy.

In a similar vein, Brown portrays a narrative about an apocalypse that used biotechnology as its weapon. The citizen population became aware of such possibilities because of such narratives and related the situation to their background knowledge that is influenced by such works. The string of intertextual relations led people in real life to enter a state of paranoia, fearing biotechnology and refusing or doubting vaccines, as it was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following quote from Sienna serves as strong textual evidence to support this analysis "Where do you think our biological weapons come from? They originate from research done at places like the WHO and CDC. Bertrand's technology—a pandemic virus used as a genetic vector—is the most powerful weapon ever created" (*Inferno*357). In this quote, Sienna directly states that scientific advancements, including biological research from reputable organizations like the WHO and CDC, have been weaponized throughout history by powerful governments. This quote aligns with and reinforces the claim that Brown's narrative portrays biotechnology being used as a weapon to cause an apocalypse. Sienna's words highlight the potential for biotechnological research to be weaponized, which could have contributed to the public's fear and paranoia towards biotechnology and vaccines

Sara Pourrazavi and others claim that COVID-19 vaccines faced hesitancy and unacceptance wherein people doubted their effectiveness and safety. The hesitancy of

vaccination is a complex issue wherein reasons for such sentiment varied; these reasons were mainly “fear of probable side effects, concern about the rapid vaccine production process, fear of inefficiency, unpleasant effect on some specific diseases, lack of trust in clinical trials, the sufficiency of the immune system to fight against COVID-19, the spread of fake information and news, religious beliefs, and political ideology” (22).

The World Health Organization (WHO) revealed that vaccine hesitancy is one of the top ten world health threats; it poses a difficulty in protecting all communities. It is stated that hesitant individuals must be approached through adequate communication to understand the implications behind the hesitance and clear the misunderstanding caused by misinformation about scientific research. The roots of such attitude toward vaccination may stem from a conspiratorial mentality or personal ideology (Fasce et al. 3-4). It is asserted that vaccine hesitancy stems from people’s belief in conspiracy theory, and such beliefs hinder the process of vaccination.

The main reason to refuse vaccination is attributed to the belief in conspiracy ideation related to population control. Beliefs in conspiracy theories are related to social dynamics, socio-political dimensions, and psychological factors; these aspects rendered conspiracy ideation an engraved psychological construct. Nonetheless, belief in conspiracies caused mistrust in authorities and communicators about vaccines (Fasce et al. 7-8). Brown’s novel spreads the notion of the existence of bioterrorism and conspiracy theories that aim to sacrifice people’s lives; these ideas can gravely influence the thoughts of its readers and stimulate such belief in conspiracy ideation.

In contrast, Chris Sibley and others argue that the state of the pandemic and lockdown strengthened the bond and trust among people and government; they emphasize that “the pandemic has seen a proliferation of conspiracies and misinformation about the origin

and nature of the virus, as well as governments' initiatives to combat it" (9). Nonetheless, citizens' trust in government and institutions suppressed conspiracy paranoia.

Gkinopoulos and others claim that the rapid unexplained spread of coronavirus created a fertile ground and atmosphere for the spread of conspiracy theories and fake news. The WHO was not just fighting the virus, but also the misinformation around it that prompted anti-vaccination. The conspiratorial ideas of explaining COVID-19 as a political mode of controlling the masses, or a hoax that spread have threatened public health by creating vaccine hesitancy and denial (1-2). In his novel, Brown highlights the efforts of the WHO to save the world and protect the civil population from the chaos that would occur as a result to the spread of a bioterrorist global attack.

3. Intersecting Narratives: Fictional Bioterrorism in *Inferno* and Real-World Pandemic Concerns

Das and Kataria (2011) define bioterrorism as "the intentional release or threat of release of biological agents (i.e. viruses, bacteria, fungi, or their toxins) in order to cause disease or death among the human population or food crops and livestock to terrorize a civilian population" (256). The idea of bioterrorism already exists in the world's dictionary which makes it possible to occur. Derrick Tin and others assert that "biological attacks have been historically rare but have the ability to inflict large-scale, mass casualty events." Nonetheless, with the current advances in technology, it has become a possibility that secret organizations or groups can develop and use biotechnology (121). Technology can endanger the lives of people when used by the wrong parties for the wrong reasons.

Likewise, in *Inferno*, Zobrist has used technology for a noble mission according to him, but with detrimental consequences. In the real world, the fear of bioterrorist conspiracy rendered people hesitant toward vaccines, but in *Inferno*, Bertrand Zobrist is the antagonist who wants to diminish the world's population. Zobrist is a genius scientist who endeavored to end overpopulation by spreading a virus that would cause sterility of a third of the world's population; Zobrist is credited to be the one who "invented the field of germ-line manipulation" (*Inferno*148). Zobrist's intentions serve as a blatant bioterrorist act; however, Langdon and the WHO are set as the saviors who want to stop the pandemic. Brown describes Zobrist's personality through this excerpt "For Bertrand Zobrist to describe the Black Death as the best thing ever to happen to Europe was certainly appalling" (148). Therefore, Zobrist has an optimistic view about sacrificing lives.

On the other hand, the world's population during the COVID-19 Pandemic had no obvious enemy or factual data about the conspiracy. People were merely faced with a deadly virus and were obliged to be quarantined and be suspicious toward everyone who showed the slightest symptoms of infection. COVID-19 was spreading at an inexplicably high rate and communities were collapsing because of the insufficiency of the medical facilities to hold the insurmountable numbers of patients. Hence, with the increasing belief in conspiracy theories, the pandemic was related to narratives of bioterrorism.

Matthew Wong informs that the lack of information about the source of Coronavirus increased the belief in conspiracy theories, asserting that the virus is a human-made bioweapon (1). This affirms that the citizen population believed that COVID is a biotechnological weapon used for bioterrorist purposes. Nonetheless, such claims remain mere theories and governments all over the world found themselves facing

such claims of conspiracy and had to convince people through adequate communication of the necessity to cooperate.

In Brown's work, people were unaware of the danger; their destiny was in the hands of secret organizations and Langdon specifically. However, during the real pandemic of coronavirus, people's awareness of the eminent threat stirred chaos and an international frenzy. Speculations became many and various, but it was mostly consented and spoken about that COVID is some sort of conspiracy. Fingers were pointed at China, the place from where the virus originated. Zobrist was *Inferno's* antagonist, whereas China was the befallen world's antagonist. Around 78% of Americans blamed the Chinese government for the global spread of coronavirus (Silver and Huang).

The issue that Zobrist aimed to solve is overpopulation. Zobrist informs that the increase in population is detrimental to human beings' existence; he explains that "Under the stress of overpopulation, those who have never considered stealing will become thieves to feed their families. Those who have never considered killing will kill to provide for their young. All of Dante's deadly sins-greed, gluttony, treachery, murder, and the rest-will begin percolating" (*Inferno* 89). Zobrist's approach to his bioterrorism is that of saving the world from the detrimental consequences of overpopulation that would render people commit crimes for the sake of survival. He considers the efforts of the WHO insufficient; therefore, he intervenes using his biotechnology intellect.

In the confrontation between Zobrist and Dr. Sinskey, Zobrist displays the outcomes of overpopulation and his plan to save the world, but Dr. Sinskey claims that the WHO is confident in managing epidemics in case of their occurrence, so Zobrist's plans are unnecessary. Zobrist, nonetheless, mocks her claims. Zobrist retorts that the WHO confidence in preserving the natural course of life is impossible, despite that Dr.

Sinskey informs him of the WHO incessant efforts he replies: “I have enlightened you about the fact that we are on the brink of a spiritual collapse...And your response? Free condoms in Africa”(90). Zobrist sees that the only solution is to diminish overpopulation by launching a bioweapon.

Arezoo Dehghani and GholamrezaMasoumi assert that the Washington Times published articles claiming that COVID is a bioweapon generated by the Chinese. However, the BBC and Washington Post denounced such conspiracy claims. The claims differed and ranged between accepting the fact that the virus is human-made against the fact that there is no adequate evidence to prove the conspiracy (143).The media’s concern during the pandemic was to discuss and investigate the story behind the emergence of the virus. Media coverage and information have a great influence on people’s perceptions and thoughts, and the media’s claim that the virus is a bioweapon prompted and strengthened the beliefs in conspiracy ideation.

Allegations based on plenty of confidential documents that investigate the source of COVID-19 have pointed fingers at China again, claiming that the virus has been leaked from Chinese laboratories in Wuhan. It is speculated that the Chinese government was colluding with the military, sponsoring research to produce the virus for the purpose of biowarfare. The World Health Organization investigators could not assert the claims about China and reported that the source of the virus is still unknown; they added that China’s lack of transparency impeded the investigation and made it difficult to announce a certain claim that asserts or negates the blame on China (Bentley).

The WHO chose to take a neutral disposition due to the lack of evidence. Claims about the source of the virus could not be asserted; it is unclarified whether the virus is human-made or even originated in China. Furthermore, China refused to cooperate and

provide full cooperation and transparency, and this resulted in an incessant chain of questions and speculations but no one could prove that China is the one to blame.

Dacre Knight attributes the massive losses of the coronavirus pandemic to the misinformation of biowarfare that led people to distrust government and institutions. The US Department of State summoned a Chinese ambassador to address the allegations against China, but the ambassador claimed that the virus had been brought to China by the US military to wage biological war. In return, a US senator retorted that the virus was leaked from a Chinese laboratory for bioweapons (Knight 465).

The distrust in government and belief in conspiracies was highly attributed to the war of blame wherein the US publicly blamed China, accusing them of waging a biowarfare, and the Chinese retorted by blaming the Americans. Thus, people stood in between attempting to make sense of what was happening to the world. It was challenging to take sides taking into consideration the economic political warfare between the leading powers. Great powers were blaming each other and strengthening the idea of conspiracy; the citizen population became engrossed in the idea of being in a conspiracy made by the elite for their clashes about power and economic gains.

Bioweapons can cause global damage and casualties; however, the citizen population does not have access to full information about the use of such weaponry. Additionally, hidden information that is accessible only to the upper hands in the communities renders citizens paranoid and opens the path for myriads of speculations and imaginations regarding conspiracies. Likewise, *Inferno* as a conspiracy narrative offers to the world the idea of secret organizations and hidden information that only the elite and certain class have access to. It displays that the citizen population is unaware of the

events behind the scenes that control their existence. More importantly, it stresses the hazardous effects that a bioweapon can cause on a global level.

4. Fueling Doubt: The Role of *Inferno* Conspiracy Theory in Vaccine Misinformation

Many critics believe that Brown's *Inferno* is an influential work that has fueled contemporary readers' interest in conspiracy theories. In this regard, Melanie McDonagh for instance related the alarming fact of the increase of population in the real world to Brown's mention of the same issue and Zobrist's intention to decrease population by bioterrorism. This section attempts to highlight the influence of *Inferno* as a literary work on people's perception of conspiracy theories. Brown's assertion of the existence of secret organizations stirred the belief in conspiracies and the arrival of a global pandemic led to vaccine hesitancy because of conspiracy misinformation that is rooted in people's minds. Tomasz Jachec considers Brown's work about Robert Langdon as an American monomyth which is a narrative that sets a hero on a quest to achieve victory against a certain crisis, and the villain believes that he is guided by fate. Brown's story tackles a major theme which is the concern of the modern world: secret societies and organizations (Jachec144). American popular culture believed in the existence of secret communities that acted behind the scenes to manipulate and control the world.

As tackled previously in this chapter, the world's citizen population believed in conspiracy theories which led to vaccine hesitancy and distrust toward the government and institutions. People found themselves at a loss because of the sudden inexplicable rate of the spread of the virus and the ambiguity around its source. As mentioned previously, the acts of major powers' blaming and accusing each other of conspiracy stressed the possibility of considering the virus a biowarfare.

On top of that, Brown's work is indebted to influencing the thoughts of its readers regarding conspiracy theories. *Inferno* is one of the books in his series about Robert Langdon, wherein his series unravels thrilling narratives about conspiracies and most importantly alludes to factual data. Brown's significant pattern in his *Inferno* is Dante's work. Dante introduced inferno and the deadly sins to the world centuries ago, and Brown uses the former's intellect to weave his story. What is more, works of literature speak to the readers and aim to raise awareness and unravel the mysteries of the world. Brown frankly states that the components of his works are realistic. This unprecedented and rare act from an author revealed hidden facts to the public and intrinsically influenced the thoughts about secret organizations and conspiracies.

Literature allows exploring universal themes, understanding the various different perspectives, and also gaining insights. Moreover, it provides a lens through which the world and its events can be examined ("The Role of Literature in Society" 1). Literature delves into social, economic, political, and educational themes to spread awareness and provide novel information through which readers can see the world from new perspectives. Brown's goal was to spread awareness about the secrets that are hidden from the citizen population.

Brown draws attention to biotechnology and bioterrorism and how they can cause massive casualties; he stresses that they can be used for depopulation purposes. EskillPeterson claims that "bioterrorism is very rare, and a standing, armed "rapid deployment force" is not needed by ECDC or the WHO. Indeed the biological weapon of mass destruction is far from reality even with today's possibilities" (Peterson 334). This draws attention to the fact that though fiction can mirror reality, it is not reality per se. Bioterrorism was not a widespread fact in the real world unlike its spread in literature such as in the work of Brown. However, with the outbreak of a global epidemic,

speculations about bioterrorism emerged and became the concern of everyone especially because of the blame pinpointed at China and the US.

In brief, *Inferno* stressed the possibility of conspiracy theories drawing attention through factual data such as the real existence of secret organizations and the increasing overpopulation rates. Furthermore, through Zobrist's character, Brown eloquently described the detrimental consequences of overpopulation and portrayed bioterrorism as a noble act of saving the human species. Brown provided contradictory perspectives about bioterrorism. Zobrist ultimately believed in his perspective of saving the world, he confidently spoke about his horrendous ideas as the ultimate solution "The silhouette continued speaking, proudly describing his masterpiece-the creation called inferno-which would save the world by culling the population" (*Inferno* 261).

On the other hand, Zobrist's actions sent chills to the opposing party "Sinskey felt goose bumps on her neck" (*Inferno*261). The WHO and Langdon were categorized as the logical parties in the story who endeavored to save the population from Zobrist's bioterrorism. Zobrist aimed to save the world from an evil perspective that sacrificed people's right to have their own children. Furthermore, the speed of the spread of Zobrist's bioweapon was extremely frightening, and the fact that the virus spread from Turkey is another reason for worry because the country is a touristic destination that gathers people from around the world. Brown exquisitely instilled terror in the hearts of his readers with his ending that left people at the mercy of finding a cure after the virus had already spread.

In the same vein, COVID spread at an exponentially high speed. RuianKe and the others state that the virus caused more than 800.000 infections by the end of March 2020 (1). This is extremely alerting knowing that the virus only started in December 2019.

Nonetheless, people entered a state of paranoia, especially with the lack of information about the virus and the way of its transmittance. The beginning of the spread of the virus created a global state of emergency wherein China was blamed as the launcher of biowar, and people were at a loss because they had no idea about the virus, how it spreads, and how can they protect themselves. The epidemic resembled an apocalyptic narrative or movie. The apocalypse was unpredicted by the civil population who became skeptical toward governments and major powers.

In addition, the circulation of misinformation and conspiracy theory heightened the sense of skepticism and vaccine hesitancy. Conspiracy was essentially tackled in the US and China who kept blaming each other for waging the bio-war and committing bioterrorism. American society, in particular, lacks no apocalyptic art; therefore, the ideas of conspiracy and apocalypse were rooted in their minds.

It is a known fact to everyone that our world is facing overpopulation, and the pandemic caused a massive acceleration in deaths; therefore, the hypothesis could be related to the *Inferno* whose core theme is solving overpopulation by bioweapons. Md Saiful Islam and others claim that one of the hypotheses about the vaccines was that they cause infertility; such rumors circulated all over social media and spread misinformation that led to vaccine hesitancy. A multi-disciplinary team was appointed to review and collect conspiracy rumors; the result was that social media information was 91% about rumors and 9% about conspiracy theories (1-2). Conspiracy ideation and rumors spread excessively during the pandemic through social media platforms.

Therefore, the similarities between Brown's work and the pandemic are quite obvious. The work was published in 2013 and prompted the belief in a conspiracy theory regarding bioterrorism that aimed for depopulation through a bioweapon that sterilizes people without their consent or awareness about the matter. *Inferno* fueled doubt about

vaccination and incurred distrust in institutions; the effects of the work's influence were clearly apparent in the attitudes of people during the crisis. This section, thus, called attention to the influence of Dan Brown's *Inferno* on the minds and attitudes of people toward COVID-19. His attempt to raise awareness about secret organizations, conspiracy theories, and bioweapons became an incentive for people to doubt everything and become paranoid about vaccines. People's distrust of government and institutions led to vaccine hesitancy, and the spread of misinformation created chaos and paranoia which impeded the process of immunization.

Conclusion:

Dan Brown's *Inferno* explores themes of bioterrorism, overpopulation, and secret organizations, striking a chord during the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel's portrayal of a virus used to combat overpopulation echoes real-world fears and conspiracy theories that surfaced as COVID-19 spread. It vividly brings bioterrorism to life, a threat that many speculated about during the pandemic, with some believing COVID-19 might be a bioweapon. This suspicion contributed to public mistrust and vaccine hesitancy. As people navigated the uncharted waters of the pandemic, the idea of a man-made virus intentionally unleashed resonated with the book's storyline, amplifying public fear and uncertainty. This sense of unease was fertile ground for the novel's other themes to take root in readers' minds.

Building on the fear of bioterrorism, *Inferno* also tackles the issue of overpopulation through the drastic measures proposed by the antagonist, Zobrist, who creates a sterilization virus. This theme paralleled real-world concerns about population growth and the ethical use of biotechnology during the pandemic. The novel highlighted the moral quandaries posed by scientific advancements and their potential for misuse—issues

that were front and center as governments and organizations rushed to develop and distribute vaccines. By weaving these themes together, the novel underscored the urgency and complexity of these debates in the real world.

The idea of secret organizations pulling the strings in *Inferno* further fueled conspiracy theories. The mysterious origins of COVID-19 and geopolitical tensions, particularly between the US and China, deepened public suspicion and distrust of governments and international bodies. The book's depiction of clandestine groups manipulating events made it easier for some to believe that the pandemic was orchestrated by hidden powers, which in turn fed the proliferation of misinformation. This connection between the novel's plot and real-world conspiracy theories created a feedback loop that heightened public paranoia.

In short, *Inferno* blurs the lines between fiction and reality, making threats like bioterrorism and secret conspiracies seem more plausible. This interplay heightened public paranoia and misinformation during the pandemic, complicating efforts to manage the crisis effectively. The novel's impact illustrates how powerful fiction can be in shaping societal responses to real-world events, highlighting the fine line between imagination and reality in the public mind. By exploring these connections, *Inferno* not only entertains but also sparks critical reflection on contemporary global issues.

General Conclusion

In an era defined by the disruptive force of a global pandemic, Dan Brown's *Inferno* takes on profound new dimensions as a reflection of the anxieties, challenges, and shifting power dynamics that have reshaped society. Through the interpretive lens of New Historicism, this thrilling work of fiction transcends its genre constraints, emerging as a vital cultural commentary that captures the fragility, resilience, and inherent contradictions of the human experience in the face of an existential public health crisis. This premise showed that literary works are not separate products, rather, they are embedded into the very fabric of society which makes these works both a reflection and a product of culture and society. In other words, art is both a mirror and an active shaper of the cultural, political, and ideological contexts from which it emanates. The novel's masterful employment of intertextual symbolism, drawing from Dante's seminal medieval work and centuries of artistic tradition, makes it an outstanding case study for this dissertation.

Through Dan Brown's gripping narrative, New Historicism emerges as a prescient interpretive lens, illuminating the intricate connections between fiction and reality. *Inferno* is no mere suspense novel; it is a clarion call to engage critically with the stories we tell ourselves, the institutions we enshrine, and the ethical boundaries we must continually renegotiate in an era of unprecedented scientific capability and civilizational fragility. As we embrace an uncertain future still shadowed by the specter of pandemic, this work of fiction offers a potent reminder that the line between narrative and lived reality grows ever more tenuous – a reality that demands our utmost vigilance, discernment, and courage in confronting the challenges that lie ahead.

The novel's central premise – a nefarious conspiracy to release a bioengineered virus aimed at culling the world's population – strikes at the heart of visceral, pandemic-fueled fears that have pervaded the collective psyche. As the world struggled with the ravages of the COVID-19 global pandemic, misinformation and distrust of institutions metastasized, bearing eerie parallels to the narrative's exploration of pervasive skepticism towards scientific authorities and elite power structures. *Inferno's* conspiracy theory serves as a haunting allegory for the post-truth landscape, where facts become subjective commodities and the very notion of objective reality is called into question. Through such conspiracy theories, the masses were collectively mobilized into a hysteric state of panic and distrust towards governments.

Yet the novel extends beyond mere allegory, its nuanced storytelling elevating it into a searing cultural artifact that reflects and interrogates the profound moral quandaries thrust into prominence by the pandemic. The narrative's engagement with transhumanist concepts such as biotechnology, genetic engineering, and the malleability of the human form poses unsettling questions about the limits of scientific ambition and humanity's propensity to play God. As the world reeled from a pandemic borne of zoonotic transmission, these philosophical inquiries took on a chilling new resonance, spurring vital discourse on the complex links between human activity, ecological intervention, and the cultivation of dangerous emergent biological threats.

The first chapter of this dissertation began by examining plague literature, those narratives born from humanity's struggle against deadly contagions across history. It explored how writers used the metaphor of plague to probe human vulnerability, social upheaval during crises, mortality, and the search for meaning amidst devastation. Ancient works like Boccaccio's *The Decameron* and more modern tales of global pandemics exemplified this genre's unsparing philosophical depths. It tackled the complex

phenomenon of conspiracy theories reflected in literature. It defined the distinction between genuine conspiracies and unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, which often emerge from psychological factors like paranoia and a hunger for explanatory patterns amid chaos.

An overview of conspiracy theory's deep historical roots revealed their propensity to spike during times of societal upheaval and uncertainty. Bioterrorism and transhumanism narratives were subsequently analyzed, exploring how speculative fiction grappled with the ethical implications of humanity manipulating biology and transcending natural limits. Finally, the theoretical chapter grounded these inquiries within the robust lens of New Historicism, emphasizing how literary works are inextricably embedded within matrices of power, ideology, and cultural context specific to their creation. This theoretical approach facilitated richer interpretations into how the literary traditions have confronted the most profound and urgently relevant questions facing the shared human experience across epochs.

The second chapter utilized New Historicism to analyze how Dan Brown's *Inferno* mirrored contemporary anxieties around pandemics and bioterrorism in the wake of COVID-19. The novel's fictional bioweapon, wielded by a villain concerned with population control, resonated with real-world anxieties about COVID-19's origins and potential bioterrorism. Furthermore, *Inferno*'s portrayal of powerful organizations manipulating knowledge paralleled anxieties regarding institutional influence and the spread of misinformation, particularly concerning public health. The chapter then explored the complex link between *Inferno* and the rise of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. While the novel may have influenced some conspiracy beliefs and vaccine hesitancy, it can also be seen as a cautionary tale highlighting the dangers of unchecked scientific progress and societal collapse during a global crisis. Ultimately, the analysis

revealed the intricate connection between fictional narratives and real-world anxieties. By objectively examining *Inferno* through a New Historicist lens, the chapter provided valuable insights into the importance of critical thinking in the age of misinformation. *Inferno's* enduring value lies in its ability to spark critical discourse about the narratives that shape our understanding of global threats and the necessity for vigilance in the face of such challenges.

As the world continues its journey of recovery from a pandemic that has irrevocably reshaped social, political, and economic realities, *Inferno* stands as a testament to literature's unique capacity to hold a mirror to the human condition in times of crisis. Its conspiratorial tale of a civilization teetering on the precipice serves as a sobering allegory for a world forced to confront its own precarity and the ever-present threat of existential disruption. Yet the novel's ultimate message is one of resilience, underscoring humanity's persistence in seeking meaning, accountability, and the renewal of frayed social contracts in the wake of cataclysmic events.

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Glossary of Terms

IdInferno: The first part of Dante Alighieri's epic poem "The Divine Comedy," depicting the journey through the Nine Circles of Hell.

The Divine Comedy: A famous medieval epic poem written by Dante Alighieri, describing an allegorical journey through the afterlife realms of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise.

New Historicism: A literary theory that studies works in their cultural and historical contexts, examining how they are shaped by societal influences and ideologies.

Bioterrorism: The intentional release or dissemination of biological agents such as viruses, bacteria, or other pathogens to cause illness, death, or environmental damage for terrorist aims.

Biotechnology: The application of science and technology to living organisms or their components to alter living or non-living materials for specific use.

Genetic Engineering: The direct manipulation of an organism's genetic material using biotechnology to modify or produce desired traits or characteristics.

Transhumanism: A philosophical movement advocating the enhancement of human capabilities through science and technology, potentially transcending current biological limitations.

Conspiracy Theory: An explanatory belief that a secret plot or conspiracy by powerful individuals or organizations is responsible for an event or situation, often lacking credible evidence.

Vaccine Hesitancy: The reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines, influenced by factors such as complacency, lack of trust, or misinformation.

Paranoia: A thought pattern heavily influenced by anxiety or fear, often involving persecutory or exaggerated beliefs about being targeted, followed, or conspired against.

Misinformation: Incorrect or misleading information that is spread unintentionally, often due to lack of knowledge or fact-checking.

Disinformation: False information that is deliberately created and disseminated with the intention to mislead or deceive.

Monomyth: A term coined by Joseph Campbell referring to the common pattern found in heroic narratives across different cultures, including stages like the call to adventure, initiation, and return.

Epidemic: The rapid spread of an infectious disease within a particular community, population, or geographic area, exceeding what is normally expected.

Pandemic: An epidemic that has spread across multiple countries or continents, affecting a significant portion of the global population.

ملخص :

هذه الدراسة تفحص بشكل نقدي آثار نظرية المؤامرة المصورة في رواية دان براون "الجحيم". تقدم الأدب وسيلة لفهم القضايا المجتمعية بشكل أفضل؛ لذلك، فإن وضع رواية "الجحيم" في سياقها التاريخي يُلقي الضوء على كيفية انعكاس الرواية واستجابتها للمخاوف المحيطة بالزيادة السكانية، وندرة الموارد، والكوارث البيئية التي فاقمها وباء كوفيد-19. تستكشف الدراسة كيف تتناغم رواية المؤامرة في "الجحيم" مع مشاعر ما بعد الحقيقة وعدم الثقة في المؤسسات في أعقاب الوباء، مما قد يؤدي إلى تفاقم مثل هذه المواقف. من خلال وضع النص في سياق أزمة كوفيد-19، تُلقي الدراسة الضوء على علاقات القوة والهواجس الثقافية التي تكمن وراء نظريات المؤامرة، وآثارها المحتملة في عالم ما بعد الوباء الذي يكافح تحديات غير مسبوقة. من خلال عدسات نظرية التاريخانية الجديدة ومفاهيم فوكو، تفحص الدراسة كيف تم تشكيل المؤامرة الشريرة لإطلاق فيروس إنقاص سكاني مهندس بيولوجيًا من قبل ديناميكيات القوة والهواجس الثقافية للحقبة التي كُتبت فيها. تُستخدم نظريات فوكو حول السياسة الحيوية، والحكومية، وعلاقات القوة والمعرفة لتفكيك تصوير تدابير السيطرة على عدد السكان ودوافع المؤامرة. تشير النتائج إلى أن نظرية المؤامرة في "الجحيم" تصدق الحلول الجذرية، مما يغذي عدم الثقة في المؤسسات والسيطرة على السكان.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجحيم , التاريخانية الجديدة , نظرية المؤامرة , الارهاب البيولوجي , كوفيد 19