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The Circle of Influencers

A closed, beige door. That was all that stood in front of me and the expanding world beyond. From behind me, Dr. Sigmund Freud, my designated guide for the trip, chided again, “We do not have all day.” This was ironic, of course, as in this Hell, there was no concept of day, or night. Taking a deep breath, I calmed my nerves once more. Gently, I twisted the handle of the door, its metal cooling my palm.

No number of breaths would have prepared me for what was beyond the door.

The screams sounded first, and what sounded like horrid sobbing.

Before us, the room stretched ahead, seeming to have no end, and as far as the eye could see, it was filled with what looked like a sea of walking corpses.

The room seemed to have been drained of all color, leached of it like life from a dying flower. The colorless, odorless room reminded me of the stark difference between this world and the one above.

A shiver climbed its way up my spine. The people kept walking by, paying us no heed, when Dr. Freud spoke again, “Welcome to the Circle of the Influencers.”

From what I could see, the people in the room could be split into two separate groups. A swarm of them, walked in and out of what looked like several screens that connected with the ceiling. A tower of monitors with no escape but the small opening that allowed the teeming mass

of corpses to enter and exit. The remainder of the sinners trudged about wearing what looked like glasses that were fused into their skin. Unseeing, and unfeeling to the others milling about.

The doctor invited me to follow him through the hordes of people towards the tower of monitors. Carefully treading through the small opening, my eyes adjusted to the glaring blue light streaming from the thousands of monitors. The light was still searing into my eyes when I beheld what was in front of me.

Hundreds of millions of direct messages, dislikes, and hate comments. Everywhere you looked, you would behold the same. There was no escaping the notifications as they forced you to look. To watch.

“You are a disgrace to society!”

“She’s so fat! She doesn’t deserve the fame!”

“Go back to the slum you came from!”

Eyes plastered to the screen, many of the punished began sobbing, tearing their hair out, screaming until they had no breath left.

Behind me, the doctor began explaining, “Here lie those who chose to use the tools of social media to inflict pain on others. In our world, they were the trolls that attacked on the internet through a stream of hate comments and dislikes. Their sole purpose and intention was to hurt, to harm, because of jealousy, or to merely get attention. They wrecked countless lives in order to make themselves feel more important. In this chamber, they are punished as they are forced to witness hate comments on their own posts, of the same color and intensity that they wrote for others.”

¹The comments and dislikes started to blur as my eyes welled with tears from looking at the screen too long.

We waded our way past the roiling sea of corpses to the sliver of the exit on the northern side of the tower.

Once we exited, it took a minute for my eyes to adjust to the lack of blue light.

The sinners who walked among us now had virtual reality glasses seared to their eyes. One of them came in close enough to be able to make out his features. ²With sallow skin, wan lips, and patches of hair lingering on his head, the sinner truly looked like a husk. Like his rage, despair, and agony was eating him up from the inside.

“What purpose do the glasses serve in their eternal suffering?” I asked.

“The glasses show them versions of reality. They build a world based on the life each sinner lived up above. In it, each troll is forced to meet those that they hurt online during their lifetime. As each of these sinners are cyberbullies and spreaders of negativity, the program picks up their hurtful posts and makes each sinner see what resulted of their negative comment. The people behind the posts. And finally, after seeing the consequences of their actions, they are forced to have a conversation with the people they hurt. One after another, after another.”

³Afterall the only thing worse than committing the sin, is the guilt of the crime; of seeing the mess it makes in someone else’s life and realizing what you have become.

¹ Several times throughout *Inferno*, we see Dante having a emotional reaction after observing the punishments of the sinners in the various Circles. He is so overwhelmed and shocked by the intensity of the punishments that he tears up or faints at the end of the canto.

² This description was created with the idea that the term “trolls”, which is commonly used to identify people who spread hate online, are personified and described as actual trolls. In *Inferno* Dante is seen creating punishments where the sinners themselves turn into a figure that represents the sin best (i.e. in Canto XXV: Circle Eight: Bolgia Seven: The Thieves, part of the punishment is for sinners to trade their bodies with serpents and vice versa). I thought it would be interesting to emulate this punishment in my piece.

³ To clarify, the sinners were not able to feel empathy in their lives in our world as they were blinded by years of self-centered learning and feeling that the world revolved around them. Thus, they remained veiled from the true

“Why do we hate others? Why do we feel the need to exert our pain, our stress to people who are blameless?”

⁴“Because many of these pressures and pains originate from unconscious thoughts, unconscious assumptions that reside in the deep wells of our minds. Over the years, based on the experiences we go through, and the lives we lead, those thoughts are either dismissed, or they start to build. They start to take shape and evolve, unseen and unheard. Until one day, we believe them to be true. And once we realize that we were wrong, that the assumption was warped by our minds, it’s too late.”

“Do—Do you think online abuse and cyberbullying will ever stop?”

“I think that we have a long way to go. These sinners are merely facing the fate that they brought upon the people they hurt. ⁵There is no need to feel bad for them, as they deserve no mercy. Mental illnesses often are your worst nightmares given flesh, and from the looks of it, more and more people will be affected until something is done. Until there are some rules, some balance, and some reform established.”

The man, if he could still be called that, now came within hearing distance. He was shouting, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” his tears streaming down his face like rivers pouring out the despair living within him. As if he could empty it out.

consequences and the pain that resulted from their actions, as they only cared about themselves, and things that affected their lives.

⁴Freud’s Theories: Freud’s main thesis was centered around the idea that there are several parts to the human mind; the majority of the mind is unheard and unseen by us on a regular basis, and he called this the unconscious mind. Here I acknowledge Freud’s famous theory when the doctor mentions that the pressures and pains originate through unconscious thoughts.

⁵ Derived from the instances when Virgil tells Dante to have no mercy for the sinners in the Circles, when he sees him feeling pity and emotion for the sinners. “...my Guide said: “...There is no place for pity here. Who is more arrogant within his soul, who is more impious than the one who dares to sorrow at God’s judgement?” (Canto XX, line 30).

He started wailing. The screeches high-pitched and dissonant... and then nothing.

Silence. Like that well of pain never existed in the first place.

Work Cited

Alighieri, Dante. *The Inferno*. Translated by John Ciardi, Signet Classic, 2001.