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**OLGA'S JOURNEY TO HELL AND BACK: ECHOES OF DANTE'S  
COMMEDIA IN ELENA FERRANTE'S *I GIORNI DELL'ABBANDONO***

**Abstract:** This paper analyzes Elena Ferrante's *I giorni dell'abbandono* (2002) as an infernal journey: the protagonist Olga moves from the dependency and timidity of her role as wife and mother to a position that Ferrante herself calls *sorveglianza*, i.e., vigilance. Arguably, this word is a gendered term in Ferrante. There exists a masculine—repressive—vigilance and a *sorveglianza* that is made of the desire to be awake and aware. In order to become vigilant, Olga needs to reach the bottom of abandonment before starting her voyage back. The fall and difficult ascent toward a regenerated self is not new in the Western literary canon, but this tradition denies a final regeneration to the figure of the abandoned woman. My analysis of the imagery and the language of the novel highlights the influence from Dante's *Commedia*, especially from *Inferno*, on Ferrante's novel. I also seek, as a second goal, to consider the question of atonement and salvation in Ferrante by addressing the absence of a Virgil-like figure in her novel. Besides textual echoes of Dante's *Commedia* on several levels (imagery, emotions, atmosphere, and lexicon) the most compelling parallel concerns the authoritative transformations achieved by Dante and Ferrante. Both poet and writer invent a “new “literature” based on the profound reworking of inherited models.

**Keywords:** Dante, *Divina Commedia*, Elena Ferrante, *I giorni dell'abbandono*, latrare, salvation, *sorveglianza*, Virgilio.

Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti  
a la salute sua eran già corti,  
fuor che mostrarli le perdute genti.  
(*Purg.* 30.136-38)

**Introduction: Pilgrims and Writers**

In a letter to Roberto Faenza, who directed the filmic rendition of *I giorni dell'abbandono* (2002), Elena Ferrante refers to her own novel as a “viaggio agli inferi” (“journey to hell”), repeating the expression in almost identical form after a few lines: “gran parte dei miei timori sono centrati sull'andamento *in crescendo dei giorni infernali di Olga*” (*La frantumaglia* 176, my emph.; “a great many of my fears are centered on the crescendo of Olga's days in hell,” *Frantumaglia* 184). Olga, Ferrante's first-person narrator, recounts her deep crisis following her husband's decision to abandon her and their children as if she were still living her story. After months of intense grief, the woman reaches the bottom of her misery on a single summer day punctuated with displacement and tragedy, “in crescendo.” However, after this experience of near absolute loss of personal meaning and fragmentation, she laboriously reemerges from the abyss thanks to

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