



AFLUENTE: REVISTA DE
LETRAS E LINGÜÍSTICA
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LOVE AS NARRATIVE DRIVE: LEVEL 26: DARK ORIGINS AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

*AMOR COMO FORÇA NARRATIVA:
LEVEL 26: DARK ORIGINS E A NARRATIVA TRANSMIDIÁTICA*

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Abstract: Throughout history, the discourse surrounding love has seen myriad interpretations since ancient Greek times. In the tapestry of European literature's evolution, the novel's intimate exploration of personal realms has elevated love as a pivotal driving force shaping characters' actions. This intrinsic link between the novel and love has become a focal point for examination. Our objective is to analyze the transmedia novel Level 26: Dark Origins (2009) by Anthony E. Zuiker and Duane Swierczynski. We aim to unravel how the merging of diverse media forms enriches the narrative's exploration of love within its broader thematic framework. This novel stands as an exemplar of transmedia storytelling, seamlessly integrating traditional print narrative with immersive online video content. Drawing insights from esteemed scholars like Henry Jenkins (2009), René Girard (1961), and Erich Fromm (1956), our analysis observes the layers of love portrayed in Level 26: Dark Origins from the romantic and familial to the more shadowy and obsessive aspects. By delving into the intricate complexities of human emotions, this multimedia extension, especially the video series, accentuates the narrative's visual storytelling prowess, and offers a nuanced portrayal of love.

Keywords: Transmedia novel; Level 26: Dark Origins; Love.

Resumo: Na história, o discurso em torno do amor tem visto inúmeras interpretações desde os tempos da Grécia Antiga. Na tapeçaria da evolução da literatura europeia, a exploração íntima dos domínios pessoais do romance elevou o amor como uma força motriz fundamental que molda as ações dos personagens. Esta ligação intrínseca entre o romance e o amor tornou-se um ponto importante de examinar. Nosso objetivo é analisar o romance transmídia Level 26: Dark Origins (2009) de Anthony E. Zuiker e Duane Swierczynski, buscando desvendar como a fusão de diversas formas de mídia enriquece a exploração do amor pela narrativa dentro de seu quadro temático mais amplo. Este romance é um exemplo de narrativa transmídia, integrando perfeitamente a narrativa impressa tradicional com conteúdo de vídeo on-line participativo. Com base em insights de estudiosos conceituados como Henry Jenkins (2009), René Girard (1961) e Erich Fromm (1956), nossa análise observa as camadas de amor retratadas na obra, do romântico e familiar ao mais sombrio e obsessivo. Ao explorar as complexidades intrincadas das emoções humanas, esta extensão multimídia, particularmente a série de vídeos, acentua a capacidade visual da narrativa, oferecendo um retrato matizado do amor.

Palavras-chave: Romance transmidiático; Level 26: Dark Origins; Amor.

INTRODUCTION



In the transmedia narrative *Level 26: Dark Origins* (2009), the protagonist, Steve Dark, emerges as a complex character defined by a history laden with trauma, stemming from his former role as an FBI agent specializing in hunting serial killers. Dark's tumultuous past, intricately interwoven with the pursuit of malevolent criminals, serves as a pivotal element in shaping his character. A moment of potential redemption manifests in Dark's trajectory when he encounters Sibby, who ultimately becomes his wife. This relationship introduces a contrasting dynamic to Dark's character, offering solace and normalcy amidst the darkness that permeates his professional history.

She never failed to take his breath away. Sibby Dark was a caramel skinned beauty with raven-dark hair and eyes so intense, it was impossible to turn away from them. Her body was endlessly fascinating to Dark, but it was her soul that made him feel most at home. He was no longer worried about polluting her with his misery. He hadn't for a long time now—she seemed immune to it. She seemed to have a curative effect on him, too¹.

However, the fragile equilibrium Dark seeks is disrupted when a malefactor from his past resurfaces, forging a menacing connection with Sibby. Dark, who regards Sibby as "the love of his life,"² is confronted with a profound threat that transcends the realm of his former criminal adversaries. The narrative strategically employs Sibby as a pivotal character, portraying her as Dark's antithesis. The dichotomy between light and shadow becomes a recurring motif, creating a symbolic representation of the complexities within their relationship. Sibby's characterization as an embodiment of luminosity within the overarching darkness adds layers of nuance to the storyline.

Central to the plot is the intricate web of emotions and conflicts revolves around these three primary characters: Steve Dark, Sibby, and the malevolent figure from Dark's past, Sqweegel. The enduring bond between the protagonist and his beloved is perpetually subjected to rigorous trials

¹ See ZUIKER, Anthony E. SWIERCZYNSKI, Duane. **Level 26: Dark Origins**. Boston: Dutton, 2009. p. 74.

² Ibidem, p. 73.



orchestrated by the antagonist. This relentless love testing becomes a crucible for the protagonist, serving as a wellspring of strength that fuels his unwavering resolve until the eventual culmination of the pursuit and capture.

Love has been a perennially significant and recurring motif within the realm of literature across epochs. For centuries, this complex feeling has woven its way through the fabric of literary expression, encapsulating a spectrum of meanings, each subject to varied interpretations and nuanced conceptualizations. The classic example of this debate may be found in Plato's *Symposium*, where each orator delivers a speech, sharing their perspective on the essence of love. Themes ranging from exploring physical and spiritual aspects of love to deeper reflections on its place in society and its relation to wisdom, beauty and divine.

Because of its different interpretations over the years, across diverse domains of academic inquiry, including but not limited to biology, psychology, and linguistics, love has been the subject of profound scrutiny, revealing its multilayered and elaborate nature. Its exploration in these disparate fields underscores the breadth and depth of its manifestations and impacts. In the artistic domain, specifically within the vast landscape of literary expression, love, with its complexities, holds the remarkable ability to influence and mold characters, propel narratives, and engender poignant emotional responses in its readership. Its ability to intricately weave itself into the very essence of storytelling renders it an indispensable element in the creation of compelling narratives and the exploration of the human condition.

Since the Greeks, the discourse surrounding the concept of love has taken on various forms. In the development of European literature, Chivalric romances and Greek novels introduced an individualistic element, representing private experiences within public or semi-public figures. The serious romance held a significant position due to its focus on heroes driven

by love and adventure rather than public aims. This marked a departure from earlier Western stories that emphasized collective goals³.



However, it was through the rise of the novel as a distinct literary form that novelists began to present and explore love in innovative and transformative ways, which novel as perceived as a genre that one talks about love⁴. Notably, Jane Austen, through her renowned work *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), offered a narrative that transcended generations, recognized for its portrayal of "archetypal romanticism"⁵ and an embodiment of "intelligent love"⁶. Austen ingeniously introduced a storyline involving a man's affection for a financially disadvantaged and socially disempowered young woman, a theme previously made popular by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740).

Still in the 19th century, Walter Scott's *The Bride of Lammermoor* (1819) significantly impacted the nineteenth-century literary landscape⁷. Its influence resonated in subsequent works such as Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*⁸ (1856) and Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*⁹ (1878). Scott adeptly

3 See MAZZONI, Guido. *Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Zakiya Hanafi. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017. P. 140.

4 Ibidem, p. 215.

5 See BUTLER, Marilyn. **Jane Austen and the war of Ideas**. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987. P. 201.

6 See TRILLING, Lionel. **Sincerity and Authenticity**: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, 1979-1970. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974. P. 82.

7 Additionally, in 1835, the Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti adapted the tragic opera "Lucia di Lammermoor" from Walter Scott's novel, later referenced in *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina*.

8 Original quote: Après la transition religieuse, madame Bovary est encore prête à tomber. Elle va au spectacle à Rouen. On jouait Lucie de Lammermoor. Emma fit un retour sur elle-même. « Ah ! si dans la fraîcheur de sa beauté, avant les souillures du mariage et les désillusions de l'adultère (il y en a qui auraient dit : les désillusions du mariage et les souillures de l'adultère), avant les souillures du mariage et les désillusions de l'adultère, elle avait pu placer sa vie sur quelque grand cœur solide, alors la vertu, la tendresse, les voluptés et le devoir se confondant, jamais elle ne serait descendue d'une félicité si haute ». See FLAUBERT, Gustave. **Madame Bovary**. Paris: Librairie de France, 1929. P. 743.

9 According to Herbert Weinstock: In *Anna Karenina*, Donizetti's opera appears more than once – when Anna, defying society, is looking for Vronsky and attends the opera to hear Adelina Patti – and the music of *Lucia* becomes part of the fabric of her sensibility and emotions – and when Levine, talking to a friend of Anna's, asks: "Where you at the Opera yesterday?" The friend replies that he was, and Levine says: "Lucia was splendid." The opera, then, had become a symbol of ill-starred love, of human relationships interfered with and destroyed by practical, social considerations. See: WEINSTOCK, Herbert. **Donizetti: And the World of Opera in Italy, Paris & Vienna in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century**. London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1964. P. 112.



interwove historical contexts with the intricacies of romantic love, seamlessly blending intimate personal moments with grand public events. The romantic entanglements depicted in Scott's narratives assert the significance of individualistic values and the pursuit of personal happiness, void of excessive sentimentality yet not devoid of emotional depth.

Numerous other examples abound, such as Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), which delves into the dynamics between individuals of different social strata and explores the darker, more destructive facets of love, resulting in tragic outcomes. Additionally, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) confronts the elusive and unattainable nature of love, entwined with the ideals of the American Dream. Thus, love, depicted in an array of forms, serves as an inexhaustible source of literary exploration within novels, enabling readers to intimately engage with characters' private lives, aspirations, and varied perspectives on their dreams and desires.

Across diverse epochs and cultural landscapes, the intricate nature of love has persistently infused literature with its multilayered essence. The complexities of love have been meticulously examined, reshaped, and portrayed in transformative ways. Whether it's the genuine affection reinvigorated by Austen, the intertwining of historical context with romantic intricacies in Scott's works, or the exploration of darker facets in Brontë's narratives, each piece stands as a testament to love's enduring relevance and its profound impact on characters and narratives.

Thus, our exploration delves into the work *Level 26: Dark Origins* (2009), jointly crafted by Anthony E. Zuiker and Duane Swierczynski. It serves as an exemplary paradigm of transmedia storytelling. Seamlessly blending traditional print narrative with online video content, this novel embodies the essence of a transmedia experience aimed at constructing an immersive narrative landscape beyond conventional literary boundaries. Our analytical journey aims to dissect and scrutinize the multifaceted dimensions of love depicted within the pages of *Level 26: Dark Origins*. Furthermore, we aim to explore how the fusion of diverse media modalities contributes harmoniously to the nuanced exploration of love within the narrative's overarching thematic framework. Through this approach, we seek to discern how each medium—whether it be written word or the dynamic visual storytelling within the

online video content—collaborates in painting a multifaceted portrait of love that transcends the confines of any singular medium.



THE TEXT SPEAKS, BUT THE IMAGE SHOWS

The novel *Level 26: Dark Origins* represents a fusion of literary text, video content, and social networking elements. The title, *Level 26*, alludes to the classification system used by law enforcement to categorize serial killers, suggesting that the character portrayed in the novel possesses attributes that could necessitate the establishment of a new classification level. Zuiker's primary objective in this experiment is to offer an enhanced, interactive entertainment experience to the reader or user through the utilization of digital media. This pioneering approach aligns with the contemporary evolution of storytelling modalities, converging written text with visual and interactive components¹⁰.

The term "transmedia storytelling" gained prominence towards the latter part of the 20th century, originating within the realms of cultural and entertainment production. The seminal definition of this concept, as proposed by Henry Jenkins, characterizes transmedia as a novel narrative form where a singular story is disseminated across multiple media platforms, each contributing distinct and valuable elements that enrich the overall narrative fabric¹¹. Notably, transmedia storytelling should not be misconstrued with the conventional concept of adaptation, as the former involves the expansion and enrichment of a narrative across different media, rather than a mere translation of an existing story into alternative formats. This distinction yields a multifaceted and expansive narrative experience, augmenting the depth and breadth of the story world.

The structural framework of the novel *Level 26: Dark Origins* demonstrates a deliberate and systematic arrangement aimed at achieving

¹⁰ See ZUIKER, Anthony E. **Interview:** Anthony E. Zuiker. [October, 2010]. Interview given to Kristine Huntley. Available in: <https://www.csifiles.com/content/2010/10/interview-anthony-e-zuiker/>. Accessed on: 9 Oct. 2023.

¹¹ See JENKINS, Henry. **Convergence culture:** Where Old and New Media Collide. New York: New York University Press, 2006. P. 95-96.



specific objectives. The work adheres to a conventional format, delineated into distinct sections, including the prologue, three main parts, and an epilogue, encompassing a total of one hundred and seven (107) chapters. Following the epilogue, expressions of gratitude are presented, followed by a brief profile of the authors, and a listing of the actors involved in the interconnected short videos that complement the written narrative.

Notably, interspersed between chapters, the authors have incorporated twenty (20) commands designed to prompt readers to engage in a transmedia experience. These directives serve as guidance, inviting readers to explore the narrative beyond the confines of the written text, thereby enhancing their understanding through other media forms. Furthermore, accompanying these directives are twenty (20) images strategically placed throughout the work, complementing and augmenting the textual narrative. It is noteworthy that these images are systematically positioned, with all but the initial image placed between instructions and succeeding chapters. This structured placement suggests that the work is designed to contain precisely twenty images, as the initial image precedes the first chapter and the final instruction does not correspond with an accompanying image. This indicates a deliberate arrangement of these visual elements within the narrative. The first two images, as an example, are as follows:

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Image 1 – introductory image



Image 2 – first command



Source: Zuiker; Swierczynski, 2009.

In this manner, the endeavor seems directed towards affording the reader twenty distinct opportunities to immerse themselves in the narrative beyond the confines of the physical book. The

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narrative unfolds progressively as the audience encounters a novel directive—whether it be to read, listen, watch, receive, enter, or any other pertinent verb. Each of these injunctions strategically embedded in the work serves the purpose of introducing a novel element that not only adds a new dimension but also contributes to the comprehensive development of the plot. The strategic utilization of imperatives represents the authors' chosen methodology for constructing this transmedia novel. Furthermore, it serves the dual function of establishing a social network where readers can congregate and share their impressions of the multifaceted experiences derived from engaging with the work.



Transmedia storytelling fosters the concept of delving into the potentials of a universe by compelling individuals to master, through curiosity, the discernible aspects of a world perpetually extending beyond our immediate grasp. This narrative approach introduces potential storylines that remain partially concealed or supplementary details that imply more than can be explicitly disclosed. The satisfaction derived from this approach differs significantly from the closure sought in more traditionally structured narratives. Unlike the expectation of departing, for instance, a theater, equipped with all necessary information to comprehend a specific story, such conclusive clarity remains elusive. Since 2013, the supplementary videos that augment the narrative have been accessible on YouTube via the dedicated account associated with the books.

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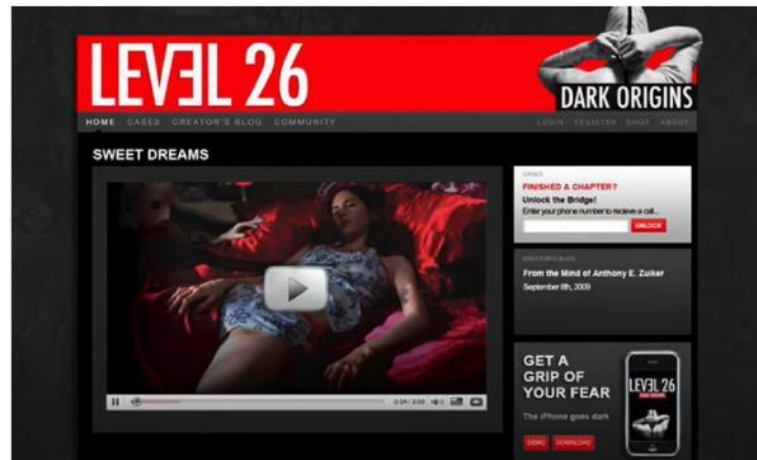
Another tactic employed by the creators of the novel involves harnessing the potential of the social network as a mechanism for expanding the narrative universe. Once again, the internet emerges as a facilitator, enabling the audience to immerse themselves in novel sensations within the narrative. Through this digital network, readers assume the role of detectives, engaging in discussions about potential story developments with other users based on their individual observations. While these discussions do not exert influence over the already concluded narrative, they empower the audience to forge their own narrative trajectories beyond the confines scripted by the authors, concurrently rendering it both a completion and an

expansion. The reader's odyssey unfolds through traversing various media and actively contributing to the personal construction of their historical experience. Simultaneously, the



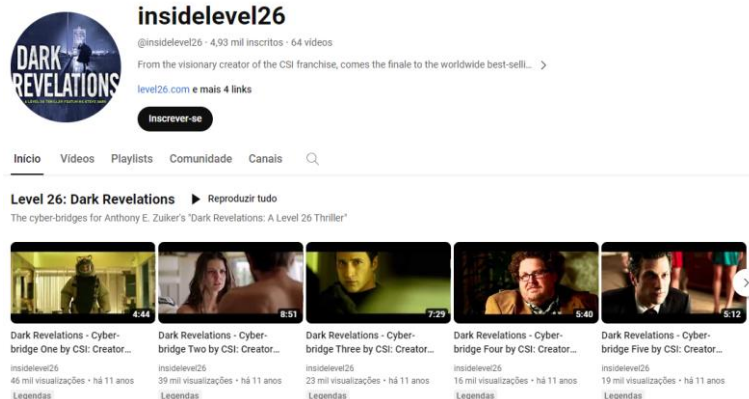
character's journey progresses as the narrative unfolds across diverse media platforms.

Image 3: Level 26 website now deactivated



Source: personal archive

Image 4: Level 26 YouTube channel



Source: Youtube

The convergence of digital technology and artistic expression engenders novel avenues for narrative construction or the reinterpretation of familiar themes, such as love. The discernment of transmedia storytelling becomes evident upon recognizing the diverse creative potentials arising from the amalgamation of disparate media forms. It introduces a paradigm shift characterized by the introduction of openings, decentering perspectives, and the emergence of fresh voices eager to traverse these diverse media landscapes. Consequently, the thematic domain of love transcends the confines of traditional textual representation, extending its presence into auditory and visual realms, thereby

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broadening the experiential dimensions through which it can be apprehended.

For a more comprehensive examination of the novel, our analytical lens will focus on the intricate interplay among the three central characters—protagonist Steve Dark, his spouse Sibby Dark, and the antagonist Sqweegel. The narrative perspective, facilitated by the omniscient third-person narrator, serves as a valuable conduit, affording readers insights into the thoughts and emotions of these characters throughout the unfolding narrative. Furthermore, in the visual representation of the story through videos, the characters are portrayed with nuanced performances, featuring San Buran as Steve, Tauvia Dawn as Sibby, and Daniel Browning Smith skillfully embodying the role of Sqweegel.



BETWEEN LOVE AND DESIRE

The introduction of the character Sibby occurs in Chapter 15, wherein it becomes apparent that she has been the recipient of peculiar messages, including "I came to you as an angel" and "Do you feel my life, blessed Mother?"¹². These communications originate from an unidentified source and have persisted for a duration of eight months, consistently coinciding with periods when the protagonist, Steve, is absent. Given Steve's profound psychological traumas and emotional scarring resulting from his professional engagements, Sibby elects to withhold information about these messages from him - a decision made in an effort to shield him from undue distress.

This particular chapter, which contains Dark's contemplative musings, reveals that Sibby is presently eight months pregnant. Over the course of the narrative, Sibby keenly observes alterations in Dark's demeanor, evoking her concern. This concern manifests as a recurrent contemplation of his past, accompanied by a persistent endeavor to identify avenues

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¹² ZUIKER, Anthony E. SWIERCZYNSKI, Duane. **Level 26: Dark Origins**. Boston: Dutton, 2009. P. 70



through which she may provide assistance to alleviate the burdens he carries:

Sibby thought back to their early days together, and how she quickly learned that there was only one thing that could soothe the pain, even if it was just for a little while. The one thing that drove away the demons and brought him back to life.

She moved her legs slowly, and noticed Steve was watching her carefully. The front of her silk nightgown swelled with her pregnant belly, but he couldn't take his eyes off a single square inch of her body. The move was all hers. He was waiting for her to make it.

Sibby knew he loved this, what it did to him. This was what Steve needed now, to take his mind away from the pain.

Even if it was only temporary¹³.

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At the conclusion of this chapter, a directive is issued: "To observe the sexual tension, log into LEVEL26.com and enter the code: Sibby." In the accompanying video, we witness the moment when Sibby approaches Dark, and the depiction of their intimate relationship unfolds, transforming what was implicit in the written scene into an immediate audio-visual experience. This transition eliminates the need for imaginative interpretation, as it presents, in a tangible manner, the dynamics between the two characters. The culmination of this scene facilitates a more directed interpretation, allowing the audience to perceive the exchanged looks and touches, leaving no ambiguity regarding the intensity of the relationship between Sibby and Dark. This visual reinforcement complements the words and sentiments previously encountered in the book.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 86.

Image 5: Cyber-Bridge



Source: Youtube

In a succinct series of scenes, the relational dynamic between Sibby and Dark becomes perceptibly imbued with salient elements, notably desire and affection. The words and actions of the characters serve as channels through which their love becomes tangibly evident and takes form. Throughout the historical evolution delineated in literary discourse, the manifestations of love exhibit distinctive paradigms that symbolize societal norms and emotional dynamics. Within the context of the late Middle Ages, courtly love epitomized a dominative affection and even during the Renaissance it subjected individuals to hierarchical subordination, as poignantly lamented by Camões: "Oh, what Love compels you to yield to varied desires!"¹⁴. This evolved into a more romanticized perception of love in the latter part of the 18th century. In the exposition of his work *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* (1977), Roland Barthes articulates the

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14 Our translation. Original quote: Ó vós que Amor obriga a ser sujeitos a diversas vontades! See CAMÕES, Luís de. **Sonetos**. Sonnet 001: Enquanto quis Fortuna que tivesse, 1595. Public domain. Available in: <http://www.dominiopublico.gov.br/download/texto/bv000164.pdf>.



transformation of love discourse into solitary expressions, observing the stagnation in its evolution despite its widespread discussion.

Their love, however, is not solitary. As yet another attempt to reinforce Sibby's significance to Dark, the narrator states, "Everything about Sibby—her touch, her taste, her smell, the very sight of her body—was stronger than any narcotic Dark had ever encountered"¹⁵. There is desire and the conflation of the concept of love with desire, as exemplified by Mathilde de la Môle's admiration for Julien Sorel¹⁶ when he exhibits resistance, diverges from the unwavering affection depicted by Dante's unrequited love for Beatrice¹⁷. On the other hand, Eros, commonly perceived as the deity embodying love and desire, fell enamored with Psyche, recognizing not only her physical allure but also her innate virtues. This aligns with the Hellenic *Kalokagathia*¹⁸ ethos, positing that goodness intertwines with beauty, thus deserving of love and adoration.

Throughout the chapters, we find more scenes that clearly depict their concern for each other. When Steve realizes that Sibby may have been drugged, sleeping soundly inside her own house, that violence is materializing around her and Dark, all the feelings intensify. And, to protect her, believing he is the target, he decides to leave her:

¹⁵ ZUIKER, Anthony E. SWIERCZYNSKI, Duane. **Level 26: Dark Origins**. Boston: Dutton, 2009. p. 89.

¹⁶ See STENDHAL. **Le Rouge et le Noir**. Paris: Le Divan, 1927.

¹⁷ See ALIGHIERI, Dante. **La Divina Commedia**. Milano: Ulrico Hoepli, 1921.

¹⁸ Classical Greek writers employed a phrase to illustrate an ideal standard of genteel personal behavior. This phrase consists of two adjectives: one signifying beauty and the other denoting virtue or goodness.



“Okay, stop,” Sibby said. “What am I missing here? You drag me up here to one of our favorite places, we haven’t talked all afternoon...Are you leaving me or something?”

Dark looked at her. This was just like Sibby—right to the point. No pretense, no games.

“Yeah,” he said.

Sibby smiled at first, until she looked at his face and knew he was, in fact, telling the truth.

He was leaving her.

The angry look on her face slammed a thousand hot needles in his heart. It knocked the breath out of him until she turned away, staring down at the Los Angeles basin below.

“You know, if this is your idea of a joke...”

“No, it’s not.”

Sibby turned back to face him again, scanning his tired eyes for the little tells that only lovers—soul mates—can see. She saw that he was telling the truth, and then her own eyes went dead. Cold¹⁹.

Despite the addictive allure of her presence, he feels an overwhelming sense of responsibility for her well-being, encompassing everything that has transpired and could potentially unfold in her life. He is wholeheartedly committed to ensuring the safety of both her and their baby. Erich Fromm argues that, while transient emotions are a common facet of human experiences, the core of love transcends these fleeting feelings. He contends that genuine love is rooted in deliberate choices and enduring commitments, constituting its fundamental essence²⁰.

A car crash, however, makes Dark return to her, especially due to the high risk it poses to the life of the fetus she is carrying. In the precarious medical intervention that followed, the doctor informs Dark that Sibby may not survive, as well as the baby. Faced with emotional maelstrom, Dark conveys to Sibby:

19 See ZUIKER, Anthony E. SWIERCZYNSKI, Duane. **Level 26: Dark Origins**. Boston: Dutton, 2009. P. 131.

20 See FROMM, Erich. **The Art of Loving**. New York: Harper & Row, 1956. P. 70.



"Hey," he said quietly. "It's me. I only have a few minutes, so...I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for making me the happiest man in the world. None of this is your fault. We built a beautiful life together. We're going to have the most amazing baby. We're going to get through this. And I'm going to do everything I can to make this up to you."

Dark paused a moment and gathered his thoughts.

"I love you. You're the only thing worth dying for. And I know that because you're the only thing I'm living for."²¹

At various junctures, Dark becomes ensconced in recollections of moments shared with Sibby. The protagonist unearths a disconcerting revelation - Sqweegel infiltrated his house, intruding upon Sibby's repose and violating her in an intimate manner. Everything is recorded. Deepening his apprehension is the realization that Sibby is not merely a conduit to access Dark but also an intentional target. This disconcerting development reaches a crescendo when Sqweegel perpetrates the abduction of Sibby within the confines of the hospital where she convalesces, still bearing the unborn child. The precarious situation intensifies as Sibby, under duress, undergoes childbirth in captivity, this scene can be seen on one of the videos, exacerbating Dark's profound desperation for her well-being.

Now with her in the hands of a maniac, it was as if someone had dropped a bunker buster into Dark's chest. He felt his insides burn, shake, collapse.

There was nothing he needed more than to destroy Sqweegel...and all he could do was stare at his dead browser and resist the urge to hurl the laptop across the room and rip the lid off the machine and scrape out the keys with his fingers...²²

And it is with all these thoughts, feelings, and concerns that the antagonist reveals to Sibby, during a call with Dark, that her husband cheated on her once, leaving his lover pregnant, but that an abortion was performed. Sibby can barely process the information and just asks Dark to save her baby. Sqweegel savages Sibby's body with surgical precision

²¹ See ZUIKER, Anthony E. SWIERCZYNSKI, Duane. **Level 26: Dark Origins**. Boston: Dutton, 2009. P. 162.

²² Ibidem, P. 300.

when Dark finds her. Their last conversation is not about them, but about the baby.



They stared at each other now, all joking and pretense fading away until there was nothing but two souls, connected at a level that lay beyond the normal senses. Words didn't mean much anymore. They both knew what they were, what they had been, and what was going to happen. A perfect and heartbreaking understanding passed between them. Dark felt his heart surge and implode at the same time²³.

Henri Peyre delineates an enduring historical presence of a romantic inclination and sensibility, suggesting a prevalence of passion over reason, an inclination towards the extraordinary, a discontentment with the present, and a certain fascination with suffering, which can already be found in Homer's *Odyssey*,²⁴. This framework sets up an opposition between emotion and reason, extolling an idealized perception of love while grappling with the inability to fully embrace it. Despite Dark's love and desire for her, he betrayed her by engaging in infidelity.

Revisiting the pivotal moment when Dark views the video capturing Sqweegel's intrusive actions upon the sleeping Sibby, rendered defenseless by the effects of sleeping drugs, unveils a crucial piece of evidence. This incident serves as a narrative turning point, shedding light on the antagonist's unnerving fixation on Sibby. Intriguingly, Sqweegel's intentions appear directed solely at Dark, refraining from inflicting harm upon Sibby, a peculiar restraint seemingly motivated by her pregnancy. The inclusion of the video amplifies the scene's grotesqueness, enabling readers to viscerally comprehend the distressing encounter Dark underwent in that moment.

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²³ Ibidem, P. 326.

²⁴ See PEYRE, Henry. **Qu'est-ce que le romantisme?**. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979. P. 9.



“Don’t worry, Dark,” Sqweegel said softly, watching the man’s tiny image on the screen. “Los Angeles Socha Medical Hospital is nearby. They’ll get her there in time.”

He reached out a latex-wrapped finger and rubbed the blurry white image of Sibby, imagining he was soothing her.

“After all,” he said, “we’ve got to do everything we can to protect that baby.”²⁵

Image 6: Sqweegel in Sibby and Dark’s bedroom



Source: Youtube

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The antagonist's fervent fixation on Dark undergoes a transference onto Sibby, effectively making her the object of his intense desire. This fixation is depicted as a perverted manifestation of love, characterized by an insatiable urge to dominate and possess her. The relationship between Sibby and Sqweegel unfolds as a harrowing tale of psychological and emotional torment, devoid of any authentic connection or affection. It is conspicuously one-sided, with Sqweegel's fixation veering towards the pathological.

In a groundbreaking study, René Girard undertakes an investigation into the depiction of desire in various European novels, spanning from the works of Cervantes to Proust. Girard posits that several lesser-known novelists have reverted to a somewhat romanticized worldview in their portrayal of human relationships. He contends that the romantic author fails to recognize that desires are significantly influenced by the desires of others, instead portraying desire as object-oriented, following a linear trajectory, and lacking

25 ZUIKER, Anthony E. SWIERCZYNSKI, Duane. **Level 26: Dark Origins**. Boston: Dutton, 2009. P. 139.

an ongoing mimetic contagion²⁶. This is eviednt in Sqweegel's case. He desires what Dark has and loves.

The intricate dynamics between Sibby and Sqweegel serve as a catalyst for the narrative's psychological tension and suspense. Sqweegel's unsettling obsession and intrusive actions create an atmosphere of constant apprehension, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats. Moreover, Sibby's pregnancy introduces a layer of complexity to their interactions, prompting heightened public intrigue as the storyline progresses. The anticipation surrounding the consequences of this unforeseen twist further intensifies the narrative's impact, amplifying the psychological depth of the characters and their disturbing relationship.



Image 7: The 14th image of the novel



Image 8: The 15th image of the novel



Source: Zuiker; Swierczynski, 2009.

The antagonist strategically exploits the birth of the baby to inflict additional psychological torment upon both Sibby and Dark. This calculated move includes manipulating Dark's mental state by sowing seeds of doubt about the baby's paternity. Sqweegel insidiously suggests that the child may

²⁶ See GIRARD, René. **Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque**. Paris: Grasset & Fasquelle, 1961. P. 8.



not be Dark's offspring, introducing an element of uncertainty and playing on Dark's insecurities. The revelation that Sqweegel claims to have raped Sibby on the night Dark was engaged with his lover adds a disturbing layer to the narrative. This revelation not only heightens the intensity of suspense but also muddles the clarity of the storyline. The ambiguity surrounding the veracity of these claims casts a shadow over the narrative, leaving the audience in suspense and rendering the authenticity of the information uncertain.

This was serious now. It's not every day you're able to destroy your mortal enemy with just a few words.

"What are you talking about?" Dark asked.

"The baby isn't yours," Sqweegel said. "It's mine."²⁷

This strategic narrative choice introduces a cloud of uncertainty, as the audience grapples with the challenge of discerning the truth amidst the antagonist's manipulative tactics. The ensuing suspense is magnified by the unsettling possibility that Sqweegel's claims might be accurate, adding a profound psychological dimension to the narrative. The intentional ambiguity surrounding these revelations enhances the overall tension and captivation of the storyline. Readers are compelled to navigate through a narrative landscape where the lines between reality and deception are deliberately blurred.

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Image 9: Steve opens the paternity result



Source: Youtube

²⁷ ZUIKER, Anthony E. SWIERCZYNSKI, Duane. **Level 26: Dark Origins**. Boston: Dutton, 2009. P. 304.



In the aftermath of the antagonist's actions and Sibby's tragic demise, an overwhelming sense of doubt and guilt infiltrates Dark's psyche. The confirmation of the paternity test unfolds dramatically, capturing Dark's tumultuous emotions and heightened tensions in vivid detail on video.

The palpable weight of uncertainty surrounding the paternity issue amplifies the emotional impact. Dark grapples with the profound repercussions of the antagonist's malevolent machinations. The video serves as a poignant visual testament to the internal turmoil experienced by Dark, encapsulating the intersection of grief, doubt, and the revelation of paternity, creating a compelling narrative climax.

FINAL REMARKS

The exploration of love across historical periods and literary perspectives reveals a conspicuous absence of a singular, definitive definition. Instead, diverse paradigms and understandings emerge, each shedding light on the intricate nature of human emotions and relationships. As evidenced by the varied portrayals of love in different eras and through the lens of different authors, love emerges as a multifarious concept, open to interpretation and subject to the context and societal norms prevalent at a given time. These varied perspectives serve as a reminder of the intricate interplay between emotions, reason, desire, and societal influences in the conceptualization of love.

Dark, operating as an FBI agent, dedicated himself to safeguarding the population from perilous threats. While the narrative might have leaned toward depicting him as a hero fighting for a collective cause, the true impetus guiding the characters' choices revolved around the emotions shared between the protagonists, particularly their love. From its inception, love played a pivotal role in shaping the novel, persisting as an integral driving force within its narrative machinery.

Level 26: Dark Origins examines love's diverse facets, exploring character development, relationships, and the intricacies of the human psyche. The accompanying video series focuses on visual storytelling and cinematic elements to convey the narrative. It



offers a detailed portrayal of love in various forms, from romantic and familial to shadowy and obsessive aspects. Simultaneously, the videos depict love through on-screen chemistry and interactive storytelling.

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