

---

---

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 13:12 December 2013

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

C. Subburaman, Ph.D. (Economics)

Assistant Managing Editor: Swarna Thirumalai, M.A.

---

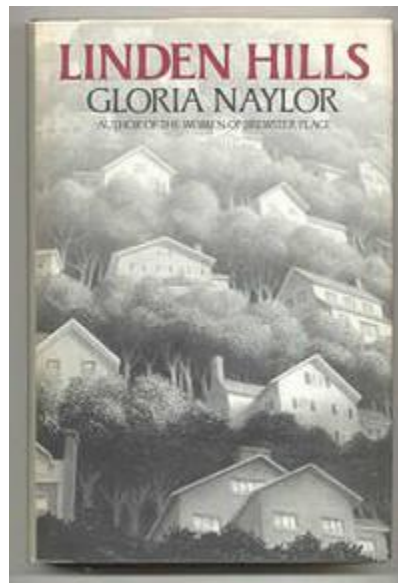
---

## Dante's Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor's *Linden Hills*

**Sadia Tabasum, M.A., M.Phil.**

---

---



Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

Sadia Tabasum, M.A., M.Phil.

Dante's Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor's *Linden Hills*

## **Abstract**

Naylor in *Linden Hills* has depicted the loss of moral values and spiritual sensibility among the residents of Linden hills. Naylor here portrays a world in which black Americans have achieved status, respect, dignity and the most importantly power, but they are so involved in the worldly pleasures that they have forfeited their heart and soul. It follows Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. Though Naylor's novel *Linden hills* (1985) is based on Dante's *Inferno*, the hell she creates is in a middle class neighborhood, controlled by the Lucifer-like man named Luther-Nedeed.

**Key words: Moral degradation, respect, status, realism, allegory and inferno.**

## **Introduction**

Gloria Naylor was born on January 25, 1950. She is an African American novelist and educator. She was born in New York; she was the first child of Roosevelt Naylor and Alberta McAlpin. From a young age Naylor's mother encouraged her to read and keep a journal.

In 1977 Naylor read her first novel, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which gave her the courage to write. Her first novel is, *The women of Brewster place*, and her second novel *Linden Hills* reflects a moral and spiritual sensibility and the kind of degradation that crept into the lives of people around her. Here she portrays a world in which black Americans have achieved status, respect, dignity and the most importantly, power, but they are so involved in worldly pleasures, that they have forfeited their heart and soul. It follows Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*.

## **Dante**

Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 in Florence, Italy. His family had a history of involvement in the complex Florentine political scene. Later Dante had a strong inclination towards the study of philosophy and he also intensified his political involvement in Florence. In 1302 he was exiled for life by the leaders of the Black Guelph's, the political faction in power at that time. The work *The Divine Comedy* has three books: *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradise*

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

Sadia Tabasum

Dante's Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor's *Linden Hills*

234

which depicts an allegorical journey through hell, around 1314 .Dante’s personal life and the writing of the *Divine Comedy* were greatly influenced by the politics of late 13<sup>th</sup> Century Florence.



Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516): *The Seven Deadly Sins*

Courtesy: [http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven\\_deadly\\_sins](http://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_deadly_sins)

## Hell in Middle Class Neighbourhood

Though Naylor’s novel *Linden hills* (1985) is based on Dante’s *Inferno* but the hell she creates is in a middle class neighborhood, controlled by the Lucifer like fellow named Luther – Nedeed. According to Catherine C .Ward, Linden Hills is a modern version of Dante’s inferno in

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

Sadia Tabasum

Dante’s Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor’s *Linden Hills*

which souls are damned, not because they have offended God, or have violated a religious system, but because they have offended themselves.

### **Dantean Influence on *Linden Hills***

Now let us see Dantean influence on *Linden Hills* which Naylor uses to shape the story. Dante pictures Hell as a huge funnel shaped pit that lies beneath Jerusalem and is entered through the dark wood of confusion and ignorance. All of Naylor's characters are also guilty of sins and as James Robert Saunder observes, "Linden Hills is a Hell, and in place of morality, there lay the single minded thirst for financial success.

As was true in the *Inferno* the price paid is in human souls" (255). The hell is organized into ten concentric circles containing separate categories of sinners. As one descends into Dante's Hell the nature of the lost soul's sins becomes increasingly heinous. Dante's Hell, culminates with Satan, who is trapped in the frozen lake from the waist down. He has three faces and from each mouth dangles the body of one of the arch traitors, Judas, Brutus and Cassius.



Courtesy: [www.wikitravel.org](http://www.wikitravel.org)

### **Concentric Drives in *Linden Hills***

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

Sadia Tabasum

Dante's Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor's *Linden Hills*



Just as Dante's *Inferno*, Naylor's *Linden Hills* has Eight concentric drives on the face of a plateau, where an individual lives in the neighborhood corresponding to the nature of his or her sins just as Dante's sinners are placed in the Hell as per their level of sins they have committed. Luther is Naylor's Satan figure. He lives at the bottom of the neighborhood and his house is surrounded by a frozen mote. Naylor's protagonist Willie Mason and Lester Tilson correspond to Virgil and Dante in the *Inferno*. In Dante's *Inferno*, Virgil appears before Dante in order to guide Dante through Hell, purgatory and paradise, Naylor parallels this by having Lester, a resident of the uppermost circular drive in Linden Hills.



Courtesy: [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)

It covers four days in the life of a twenty year old black poet Willie Mason working temporarily as a handyman to earn money to buy Christmas presents, Willie passes through Linden Hills and like Dante analyzes the moral failures of the Lost Souls he encounters. Below

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

Sadia Tabasum

Dante's Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor's *Linden Hills*

237

upper Linden Hills lies a more exclusive section, the Tupelo Drive area which corresponds to the city of Dis. At the center of Linden Hills is the house of Luther surrounded by a frozen lake. In an early review in the New York times book review section, Mel Watkins makes the connection with Willie and Lester “(read Dante and Virgil) ,two young poets” and calls the novel “Miss Naylor’s version of the ‘Inferno’, a much more ambitious work in which realism is subordinated to allegory. The physical description of Linden Hills is deliberately similar to Dante’s inferno.

### **Lester and Willie’s Journey**

Lester and Willie’s journey takes place on December 19<sup>th</sup>. While they stand talking, they meet Norman and Ruth Anderson, who invite them to their apartment for Warmth and coffee. Norman is a good hard working man who finds himself possessed every third spring by a mental demon that he calls “the pinks”; when they attack, Norman behaves abnormally, but Ruth stays with him, love and concern being prevalent in their home. So, we see Ruth epitomizes the ultimate in human love, just as Dante’s Beatrice symbolizes Divine love. Willie has a kind of concern towards Ruth that is something more than physical desire; she is a dream and a source of inspiration just as Beatrice’ figure is to Dante. It is Ruth who suggests to Willie that he and Lester earn Christmas money by working at odd jobs in Linden Hills. Although Willie is afraid of going into Linden Hills, he enters it to please Ruth. Later Ruth sends Norman down to Fifth Crescent Drive because she is afraid that Willie may be in trouble; similarly a heavenly messenger comes to help Dante at a similar place in Hell.

### **A Neutral**

Once in Linden Hills, Willie and Lester stop at Lester’s home on Fifth Crescent Drive. Lester is both a good pagan and a neutral. He has not really accepted the American social system, having refused to attend college; so, he is un-baptized. He is a neutral, he knows what is right and wrong, and he suffers from the punishments of Dante’s neutrals. Lester mocks his mother’s materialism and eagerness to be accepted by those “further down” in Linden Hills; he also considers Roxanne a hypocrite because, though she has given token support to Civil Rights issues, her true goal is to marry “well”. Lester here is not morally superior, because he refuses to

go to college and supports himself by giving poetry readings and doing an occasional odd job. Actually, he continues to live in comfort at home, while condemning the source of his physical comfort; seems like he is the biggest hypocrite here.

Willie and Lester spend their first full day of work as busboys at the wedding of Winston Alcott of Second Crescent drive, equivalent to Dante's circle of carnal sinners. Winston has been persuaded to end an eight year relationship with his lover David because rumors of Winston's homosexuality threaten his legal career. As a reward to Winston for entering a doomed marriage, Luther grants him a lease on the exclusive Tupelo Drive area. David and Winston are Naylor's version of Dante's Paolo and Francesca the lovers who were punished by being locked in an eternal embrace while they fly around in a perpetual whirlwind. In Naylor's version, David recites and parodies a Whitman poem as means of announcing to Winston that their love affair will end if he goes through with the marriage. David's and Winston's punishment is not the eternal embrace of Paolo and Francesca, but a lifelong separation. David suffers in this circle because he loves a man who is unworthy of him, but Winston is headed for Lower Hill, among the betrayers.

### **Circle of Gluttons**

At the Alcott wedding Willie meets Xavier Donnell from Third Crescent, the circle of the gluttons. He was in love with black woman, but he hesitates to do anything about it. Willie and Lester's next task takes them to Fourth Crescent Drive and the Parker's home. Chester Parker is inviting the mourners the night before the funeral of his wife Lycentia. She is not yet buried, but Chester has hired Willie and Lester to steam off the wallpaper in her bedroom so that the room will be repapered and new furniture moved in during the funeral, thus all will be ready for Chester's next wife as soon as Lycentia is buried. In life she spearheaded a group whose goal was to block a housing development in Putney Wayne, in order to preserve the property values in Linden Hills. Luther completes Lycentia's work by cutting a deal with a white racist organization. The parallel to the Inferno is clear. In circle four the sinners formed two groups, attacking each other. Ironically, when the followers of Nedeed and Lycentia unite to obstruct

housing for the people of Putney Wayne, they are really rejecting a part of themselves, their own past.

### **Rev. Michael T. at 000 Fifth Crescent Circle**

Next we have Reverend Michael T. who lives at 000 Fifth Crescent Drive, the last house on the last circle in the upper section of Linden Hills. This drive parallels circle five in the *Inferno*, where the angry liars scream at each other and the melancholic bring forth a bubbly froth whenever they try to speak. Hollis is depressed; he was busy pursuing sensual pleasures and material possessions, which have isolated him, while he also lost touch with his own feelings.

### **Subtypes of Sinners in Lower Hell**

Two brick pillars mark the entrance of Tupelo Drive and the last three levels of Linden Hills; Dante includes a number of sub types of sinners in the lower circles of Hell. Naylor omits this further classification of sinners and the three levels are where Laurel Dumont, Professor Daniel Braithwaite, and the Needed “family” live. Norman appears and arranges a work the next day, shoveling the walks at the Dumont home on Tupelo; there Laurel faces the emptiness of her life on Tupelo Drive. She withdraws from everything, marriage, job, and all connection with the outside world; at the same moment Needed appears with his eviction notice. And after sometime Laurel commits suicide by driving into the wintry pool, destroying her face as it crashes into the cement hole.

### **Meeting with a History Scholar**

After this incident Lester and Willie meet Daniel Braithwaite. He is a history scholar whose entire education has been paid for by Nedeed. Once Braithwaite received his PhD he moved one street down from the Dumont’s, into a home given to him by Needed; he is aware of the things that are going on around the area, but he has no intention of stopping the corruption he observes; he uses it as a means of winning honor and an access to get the Nobel Prize. Lester

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

Sadia Tabasum

Dante’s Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor’s *Linden Hills*



asks him, “Did you ever stop to think that you could use your work to help save people?” The fraudulent counselors in Dante’s circle Eight gave false counsel, but Braithwaite totally refuses to counsel.

### **Luther to Put Up the Christmas Tree**

Willie and Lester have one more important work to complete, and that is to help Luther put up his family Christmas tree; there they meet Luther’s wife Willa Prescott Nedeed. Willa’s story is told in italics which is the subplot of the novel; Willa at the beginning never tried to protest against the deeds of Nedeed. She hopes that if she doesn’t protest about Nedeed’s murder of their son, Luther will allow her to come out of the basement and bear him another child. She is like count Ugoline in circle nine of the *Inferno* who with his sons and grandsons, was imprisoned in the tower and starved.

### **Nedeed Discovery**

Willa being lonely in the basement discovers the hand written entries in an old Bible of women who lived many generations ago; this diary reignites her interest in living once again. Thus she realizes that there is another woman who is suffering just like her; she comes across the other Nedeed women through the homely records they have left behind in letters, diaries, cookbooks, and photographs. From the papers of Luwana Parkerville, Willa learns how enslavement by her husband causes Luwana to lose faith in God. Next is Evelyn Creton Nedeed, who tries to forget all the problems by keeping herself busy with the food. She bakes huge meals in order to win her husband’s attention, but it was of no use so she starves herself to death by eating little and consuming large doses of laxatives. And the third one is Priscilla McGuire Nedeed, who goes on deteriorating from a laughing, free newly-wed, to a mother increasingly held down by her son. She loses her identity. The three wives are Naylor’s versions of the three arch traitors whom Satan chews on in circle ten, Judas, Brutus and Cassius who have betrayed their lords or benefactors; likewise the Nedeed women have betrayed themselves.

### **Conclusion**

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 13:12 December 2013

Sadia Tabasum

Dante’s Images of Sins Trickling Down To Naylor’s *Linden Hills*

*Linden Hills* is a powerful and sweeping indictment of black middle class life. The residents of Linden Hills have it instilled in their minds that when they separate themselves from the blacks, then they gain an entry into Linden Hills; this is the quickest way to gain an identity and can rise in a society which discriminates against colored people.

---

### Reference

- Dante, Alighieri (1971). *The Divine Comedy* 1: *Inferno*. Trans. John D. Sinclair. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Earley, Whitt Margaret (1999). *Understanding Gloria Naylor*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.
- Naylor, Gloria. *Linden Hill* (1986). New York: Penguin
- Ward, Catherine C. Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills*: A Modern Inferno. *Contemporary Literature*. 28, no.1.
- 

Sadia Tabasum, M.A., M.Phil.  
W/o Mansoor Ahmed  
Opp. Park, Beernahallikere  
Hoysalanagar  
Hassan- 577132  
Karnataka  
India  
[sadia\\_tabasum@rediffmail.com](mailto:sadia_tabasum@rediffmail.com)