

Symbolism In Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*

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Abstract

It is not always possible for an author to convey their thoughts clearly using words. So, they use symbols as a tool to convey deeper meanings. Symbolism gives a writer freedom to add double levels of meaning to his work: literal one that is self-evident and a symbolic one whose meaning is far more profound than the literal one. Symbolism gives universality to the characters and the themes of a piece of literature. Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Symbolism is the art of using an object or word to represent an abstract idea. Dan Brown is essentially a symbolist whose works are filled with symbols. Dan Brown wants to reveal some of the secret symbols hidden in Leonardo's works. To him, extensive use of symbols is a necessity to convey his ideas.

The Da Vinci Code is the most famous novel of Brown where Langdon, the protagonist searches for an ancient secret. *The Da Vinci Code* is full of symbols which presents a multiple layer of meaning before the reader. These symbols hold the soul of the novel. A better understanding of these symbols helps to comprehend the novel. Most of the symbols in the novel celebrate the feminine power. Brown has used symbols like pentacle, glass pyramid, *The Mona Lisa*, keystone, Holy Grail etc. This paper tries to unveil the deeper meanings behind the symbols used in the novel and how these symbols add extensive beauty to the literary work.

Keywords: Symbols, paintings, Da Vinci, theology, masculinity, femininity.

Introduction

An artist cannot always adequately express his ideas about life through his artistic medium directly. He has to resort to symbolic devices. The term symbol is believed to have been derived from the Greek word 'symballein' which means to cast together or to compare. It is considered to be quite a complex term and cannot be defined precisely as it has varied meanings and purposes to serve in logic, fine arts, mathematics, theology, semantics, letters and epistemology. The etymological meaning indicates that it stands for the similarity between the sign and the signified. In the broadest sense a symbol is anything that signifies something; in this sense all words are symbols. In fact, the symbol is a sign of something else in two different senses: literal and suggestive. In the first sense it may be a literal sign of some definite idea or object which it denotes. That is a sign, of what it means. In this sense it is clearly distinct from the emotive use of it. The second sense suggests that the symbol may be something other than the idea or object that it literally and scientifically denotes. This gives another level of meaning related to the spirit or inner being of man or the mysteries of life that cannot be expressed by words directly. It is in this second sense that the term symbolism is usually used in relation to art.

Symbolism gives a writer freedom to add double levels of meaning to his work: literal one that is self-evident and a symbolic one whose meaning is far more profound than the literal one. Symbolism gives universality to the characters and the themes of a piece of literature. In literature symbolism is seldom absent from any genre -poetry, drama fiction etc. "We live in the age of symbolism in literature" (Brumm 367). Symbolism is the use of symbols to signify ideas and qualities by giving them symbolic meanings that are different from their literal sense. Symbolism is the art of using an object or word to represent an

abstract idea.

The aim of symbolism is “the enhancement of the importance of what it symbolises” (Whitehead 74). Whitehead is of the view that human mind functions symbolically. There exists a close correspondence between the nature of symbol and its meaning. Some philosophers like A.N. Whitehead, S.K. Langer, Ernest Cassirer, W.M. Urban and Carl H. Hamburg have offered us a comprehensive theory of symbolism. The concept of symbol is essential for the proper understanding of arts, science, myths and languages. A symbol, according to Virginia Woolf, “should not lose its identity by becoming something else, and should look one single whole and not two separate parts” (Sharma 4). Virginia Woolf pointed out that Aeschylus, the master playwright had displayed remarkable symbolic power. Symbolism adds double layer of meaning to a work: literal and symbolic. The symbolic meaning is far more profound than the literal one. Therefore, symbolism gives universality to the characters and the themes of literature. Symbolism in literature evokes interest in readers as they find an opportunity to get an insight of the writer’s mind, on how he views the world and what he thinks of common objects and action, having broader implications.

The objective of a symbol is to suggest and not represent anything literally. It is to be used to suggest ideas and feelings. Quite often, symbols are used to depict the unconscious which can be known only through them. Thus, it is not easy to explain symbolism. D. H. Lawrence defines symbol as an “organic unit of consciousness with a life of their own” (5). He holds the view that a symbol embodies a complex emotional experience. According to him, two things are essential in the symbol. Firstly, it consists of man’s emotional experience which is not simple but complex. Secondly, it is the well-organised part of his working unconsciousness. Lawrence further says that great a symbol cannot be imparted a meaning. In fact, it is not easy to interpret symbols because “their value is dynamic, emotional, belonging to the sense- consciousness of the body and soul, and not simply mental” (5). It is impossible to comprehend and communicate the full meaning of great symbols. Thus, the only way to explain it is to proceed from the quality of emotion connected with the symbol.

Rene Wellek and Austin Warren point out that an image “may be invoked once as a metaphor, but if it persistently recurs, both as presentation and representation, it becomes a symbol, may even become part of a symbolic system” (189). A metaphor is a rhetorical device in which the traits of something are attributed to something else, but not in a literal sense. Symbols, unlike metaphors, are not specific in their interpretation. They carry a wide range of ideas through generations. The symbol’s meaning must be inferred from the context. A symbol is different from allegory. Goethe was the first man to bring out the difference between the two. In the early 19th century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge drew a clear distinction between them. In his view an allegory is simply a translation of abstract ideas into a picture language, while a symbol “is characterized by translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special... above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal” (6)

Analysis

The Da Vinci Code revolves around the murder of Jacques Saunière and the secret he wanted to pass. The whole novel is filled with clues in the form of symbols and codes in order to help Langdon and Sophie to reach their goal. Saunière arranged his body in the posture of The Vitruvian Man and had drawn a pentacle on his stomach using his own blood as ink:

Saunière’s left index finger was also bloody, apparently having been dipped into the wound to create the most unsettling aspect of his own macabre deathbed; using his own blood as ink, and employing his own naked abdomen as a canvas, Saunière had drawn a simple symbol on his flesh—five straight lines that intersected to form a five-pointed star. The pentacle. (Brown

38)

The pentacle is considered to be one of the oldest and most powerful symbols in the world. This is a symbol of the sacred feminine. According to Langdon, it “is a pre-Christian symbol that relates to Nature worship”. (39) Langdon said that the pentacle represents the female half of things. It is considered that the pentacle represents Venus, the goddess of love and sexuality. In western culture, it represents microcosm and macrocosm, the whole act of creation, the whole, and was used as a sacred symbol in pagan culture linked to the goddess Venus. (Caro 10 Powerful Ancient Protection Symbols) Brown has used the pentacle to signify Mary Magdalene. In this novel it is said that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus Christ. So, it is probable that the pentacle was a symbol to represent Mary Magdalene as she is said to be the sacred feminine. It was her womb that carried the legacy of Jesus, as per the novel.

Brown also used this symbol of the sacred feminine as a tool to counter the ideas of female subjugation in the society. He says:

The ancients envisioned their world in two halves—masculine and feminine. Their gods and goddesses worked to keep a balance of power. Yin and yang. When male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos. “This pentacle is representative of the female half of all things—a concept religious historians call the ‘sacred feminine’ or the ‘divine goddesses’. Thus, pentacle represents the ideology of equal status of male and female. (39)

It is said that the Church tried to eliminate the sacred feminine from modern religion which led to the misinterpretation of many symbols as pagan and symbols of devil worship.

The murder of Saunière took place in the Louvre. The entrance was a ‘neomodern glass pyramid’. A pyramid is a symbolic link between the old and the new. A pyramid represents the sense of harmony and unity with ourselves and with the environment. A pyramid also symbolises enlightenment, as it is a symbol of human development. In the novel it plays an important role. Sophie was ignorant about her own identity but she becomes enlightened at the end. Langdon who believed that Mary Magdalene was the wife of Jesus Christ was provided with the blessing to kneel down before her tomb. So, the Louvre’s pyramid could stand for the enlightenment of both. Langdon says that the pyramid is a symbol for masculinity, enlightenment and illumination.

There is another pyramid present in the story, an inverted pyramid. “As they walked, Langdon caught a glimpse of the Louvre’s lesser-known pyramid—La PyramideInversée—a huge inverted skylight that hung from the ceiling like a stalactite in an adjoining section of the entresol.” (23) The Inverted Pyramid is perceived as a Chalice, a feminine symbol. “The chalice is an ancient symbol. Long before it became the symbol of the Holy Grail or the cup that caught Christ’s blood, it was completely female in its symbolism, from the water it carried, the female element, to its shape as a womb-like receptacle.” (Codes and Symbolism) The stone pyramid below is interpreted as a Blade, a masculine symbol: the whole structure could thus express the union of the genders. Mary Magdalene was buried under the inverted pyramid at Louvre. Her tomb was symbolically protected by the blade and chalice, masculine and feminine union.

Another important symbol present in the novel is the keystone. After the death of Saunière, Silas says “Teacher all four confirmed the existence of the clef de voute ... the legendary keystone.” (13) It is said that it is a map that led to the final resting place of Mary Magdalene, the Holy Grail. Keystone is an icon that has both philosophical and symbolic relevance. Symbolically, it’s the final piece of a puzzle. “This ancient symbol has permeated history from its beginning - the creation of the world. Its spiritual meaning is considered to be broad, thorough and convincing, as it is of biblical origin. ... So, the meaning of the keystone can vary from ‘the most important part of anything or its main idea’ to ‘the completion of

something” (SmThe Symbols, Allegory and Motifs).

Keystone is the last stone placed in the arch, and as such represents completion. Keystone was historically used for representing the completion of temple. According to Indian philosophy we are God’s temple and God’s spirit dwells in us. Tagore has glorified this idea in his Gitanjali. So, Keystone also represents the perfection of man accomplished by the unification with God. One could see the same idea in The Bible too. “Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?” (New King James Version, 1 Corinthians 3:16)

As Langdon passes through the hallway, he notices a model of a knight in full armour in Saunière’s room. “Langdon peered down a short hallway, into Saunière’s luxurious study—warm wood, Old Master paintings, and an enormous antique desk on which stood a two-foot-tall model of a knight in full armour.” (28) This knight symbolises the role of Saunière. He was the guardian of the secret regarding the Holy Grail and its location. He had fulfilled his duty as a great soldier. He embraced death rather than betraying his brotherhood. But all knights could not be trusted. Some may enrol in the army in order to betray them. Teabing is one among those knights. Langdon says, “We're on a Grail quest, Sophie. Who better to help us than a knight?” (238) but Teabing was using them. He wanted to reach the Holy Grail and use that information to destroy the church. He was aware that without Langdon, he couldn’t find out the location as it was concealed using symbols and only Langdon was capable of deciphering those symbols.

Roses are also an important symbol in the story. “Roses are a traditional gift symbolizing romantic love. They have different meanings depending on their color, the white rose is symbolic of innocence and the feminine and the red rose, true love and the masculine, in The Da Vinci Game a pink rose has been used to signify a graceful merging of both feminine and masculine.” (Codes and Symbolism). When Langdon and Sophie opened the bank locker, they got a box. The polished wooden box was about the size of a shoebox and had ornate hinges. “The wood was a lustrous deep purple with a strong grain. Rosewood, Sophie realized. Her grandfather’s favourite. The lid bore a beautiful inlaid design of a rose.” (207) Langdon had explained to Sophie that the ‘five petaled rose’ is a Priory symbol for the Holy Grail.

Saunière had crafted the beautiful box for his cryptex using the symbol of the rose, because that's exactly what his device will lead to: a quest for the Grail. A five petal rose is similar to that of a pentacle. Both have five sides or petals which symbolises the five stations of female life— birth, menstruation, motherhood, menopause, and death and thus symbolises womanhood and sexuality. Langdon also explains that a rose is hung over meetings to indicate the confidentiality of the meeting. Sophie recalls her conversation with Saunière as “Sweetie, her grandfather said, rather than lock each other out, we can each hang a rose—la fleur des secrets—on our door when we need privacy. This way we learn to respect and trust each other. Hanging a rose is an ancient Roman custom.” (219) Langdon also confirmed that ‘Sub rosa’ was used to indicate secrecy. Whatever told under the rose had to remain a secret.

Thus, we can infer that the five petaled rose represents Mary Magdalene. Roses symbolises secrecy, womanhood and sexuality in various context. Mary Magdalene is a fusion of these three features. Her real identity along with that of her bloodline was hidden. Mary Magdalene being a woman who bore the child of Jesus confers with all these qualities of the sacred feminine and sexuality.

When Langdon entered the elevator, he wanted to divert his mind because he suffered from claustrophobia. Captain BezuFache wore a Crux Gemmata and it grabbed Langdon’s attention. Brown says:

As they ascended, Langdon tried to focus on anything other than the four walls around him. In the reflection of the shiny elevator door, he saw the captain's tie clip—a silver crucifix with thirteen embedded pieces of black onyx.

Langdon found it vaguely surprising. The symbol was known as a *crux gemmata*—a cross bearing thirteen gems—a Christian ideogram for Christ and His twelve apostles. Somehow Langdon had not expected the captain of the French police to broadcast his religion so openly. Then again, this was France; Christianity was not a religion here so much as a birth right. (26)

Although the symbol had no significance at the beginning it proclaims the Captain as a devout Catholic. This fact is concentered by the words of Collet:

The captain attended mass and confession with zealous regularity—far more than the requisite holiday attendance fulfilled by other officials in the name of good public relations. When the Pope visited Paris a few years back, Fache had used all his muscle to obtain the honor of an audience. A photo of Fache with the Pope now hung in his office. The Papal Bull, the agents secretly called it. (53)

Fache is a devout Catholic. His reverence to the church is affirmed by Collet's words. Fache being a police officer wore the *Crux Gemmata* which further proves his orthodox belief in Church. His orthodox belief in Church tempted him to take sudden action against Langdon. It also made him to leave Bishop Aringrosa at the end of the novel without even taking his statement. According to the law the Bishop was also guilty for supporting the crime. But the Captain winks at the law for the sake of Church.

Another important symbol used in the novel is the painting, *Mona Lisa*. Saunière had written "O, Draconian devil! Oh, lame saint" (47) on the floor before he died. It "was a perfect anagram of...Leonardo da Vinci! *The Mona Lisa*." (105) It is Da Vinci's most famous painting. It was admired by the whole world due to the aura of secrecy it pertained. "Leonardo carried this painting with him all his life, held it so dear and never considered it finished. *The Mona Lisa* epitomizes the constant experimentation and the quest for understanding of this incredible mind and *Mona Lisa's* smile is considered by many to be the ultimate enigma" (Codes and Symbolism). The conclusion drawn is that *Mona Lisa* is not any particular person, but a cryptic reference to the Egyptian gods Amon and Isis. 'Mona' is an anagram of Amon and 'Lisa' a contraction of 'Isa, meaning Isis. Thus "Mona Lisa is neither male nor female. It carries a subtle message of androgyny. It is a fusing of both." (129)

In the novel, Professor Langdon discovers that da Vinci painted *The Mona Lisa* in opposition to the Church's suppression of Mary Magdalene's true identity. Langdon says, "Da Vinci painted the horizon line on the left significantly lower than the right." (128) It was a trick played by Da Vinci. It made *Mona Lisa* look larger from the right than from the left. "Historically, the concepts of male and female have assigned sides—left is female, and right is male. Because Da Vinci was a big fan of feminine principles, he made *Mona Lisa* look more majestic from the left than the right." (128) Da Vinci was a member of the secret society Priory of Sion and they considered Mary Magdalene as wife of Jesus Christ. Thus, *Mona Lisa* was used to camouflage Mary Magdalene.

There is constant use of red service lighting throughout the story. Red colour is a symbol of danger. It's the colour of passionate love, violence, danger, warning, anger, and adventure. Our prehistoric ancestors saw red as the colour of fire and blood. It represents both the cupid and the devil. When Langdon entered the Louvre, he was greeted by the red servicing light from beneath that enabled staff members to navigate hallways and yet kept the paintings in relative darkness to slow the fading effects of overexposure to light. This light was a symbol of the danger that was awaiting him. Captain Fache had deduced that Langdon was the murderer and he wanted some proof so that he could arrest him. The red light had casted an unnatural smoulder across the paintings. Such a smoke has descended in the life of Langdon too. He was awakened from his sleep to be accused as the murderer of Saunière. Thus, in this context the red servicing lighting was a warning to Langdon.

Throughout the story Langdon wears a Mickey Mouse watch which had been a

birthday gift from his parents on his tenth birthday. “Disney animations had been his first introduction to the magic of form and colour, and Mickey now served as Langdon's daily reminder to stay young at heart.” (158) Langdon also talks to his classes about how remnants of the Grail story are found in Disney stories. Disney, symbolized in the Mickey watch, exemplifies the importance of magic and imagination for people. Disney, like Grail stories and like religion, is not necessarily true but it gives people something much more important-mystery and wonderment. Thus, the Mickey watch shows that the story is like a cartoon. It is for the amusement of people. Brown himself has told that his stories are for entertainment not to flutter our religious belief. The watch also presents the idea that we should remain young and innocent at heart and enjoy life.

The painting *The Last Supper* is also used as a symbol in the story. Da Vinci's one of the most famous paintings is the *The Last Supper*. Many consider the painting has some hidden secret like *The Mona Lisa*. “Others insisted that the suspicious placement of disciples in *The Last Supper* was some kind of code.” (183) On re-examining the painting, it's discovered that the one who was sitting at Jesus' right hand is Mary Magdalene, not apostle John. In addition, the famous cup from which Christ drank, the Holy Grail, is conspicuously left out of the painting. Here is where Brown cleverly weaves medieval legends with high Renaissance art to suggest that the Holy Grail - which became the subject of endless search by medieval knights - was not a cup at all but Mary Magdalene herself, the human receptacle for Jesus' blood line.

As Saunière died he stripped off his dress and posed like ‘*The Vitruvian Man*.’ It is a famous painting of Leonardo Da Vinci and it follows the golden ratio. The drawing, which is in pen and ink on paper, depicts a man in two superimposed positions with his arms and legs apart and inscribed in a circle and square. “*The Vitruvian Man* was painted by many artists of the Renaissance and since, this was supposed to show the perfect human dimensions and is indicative of the divine number Phi. In *The Da Vinci Game*, the *Vitruvian Man* represents creative genius, art, music, film, and literature and the amazing people who created them, their names and creations hidden in anagrams..” (*Codes and Symbolism*)

According to the Pythagorean tradition, the circle represents the spiritual realm and the square represents material existence, so the human body represented the perfect blend of matter and spirit, which is reflected in its proportions. Ironically, the soul had deserted the body, but the image of the union remains. It could also represent the idea that even if we pass away our deeds and memory will last in the world. “The memory of the righteous is blessed, But the name of the wicked will rot.” (Proverbs 10:7). This symbol could also be seen as an attempt by Saunière to grab Langdon and Sophie's attention to Da Vinci as the inscription and his body posture indirectly pointed at Da Vinci's another master painting. So, this could also be a clue so that they may go and check the Da Vinci paintings because the next clue was in *The Mona Lisa*.

Conclusion

The symbols used by Brown have a religious interpretation too. The Holy Grail, keystone, Crux Gemmata, the Last Supper, Mon Lisa etc can only be understood from a theological and historical outlook. The Holy Grail is considered to be the chalice from which Jesus had wine in Last Supper. But in the novel it is conceived to be the womb of Mary Magdalene. This point is proved by presenting Leonardo's painting *The Last Supper* and claiming the one who stood at the right side of Jesus as Mary Magdalene. Keystone is also an important symbol which symbolises completion. *Mona Lisa*, most famous painting of Leonardo, is said androgynous. *Mona Lisa* is claimed as symbol of sacred feminine too. Another important symbol is the pentacle. It is said as the Goddess Venus. It also represents the sacred feminine and the mystical power of female womb to hold a life. Thus most of the

symbols are used to glorify womanhood.

There are other symbols too. The Mickey watch of Langdon is a symbol that indicates the whole story is just an illusion. The ideas and facts presented in the novel are a imaginative creation of the author. The sudden introduction to a cartoon character makes the reader come back to reality that all he read was a fiction. It also recommends the reader to remain young at heart. Another important symbol is the knight. This knight symbolises the role of Saunière. The knight also represents Teabing. Ironically one knight is an honest and brave while the other is cunning and a betrayer.

The Da Vinci Code is a best example for the eminence of Dan Brown as a powerful symbolist. He makes the use of abundant symbols in *The Da Vinci Code*. Symbols endow his novels. The symbolic elements in his novel are a key with the help of which one can adequately understand and evaluate her art and ideas. Dan Brown, by making use of the modern symbolistic technique, has given a new dimension to the American English literature and detective novel. He has been instrumental in elevating detective novel to the main stream.

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