

# **Intersection of History, Art, Architecture and Literature - A Study on Select Novels of Dan Brown**

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## **Abstract**

Dan Brown is a contemporary American author who is well known for his novels that revolve around various conspiracy theories. Apart from the conspiracy theories, Dan Brown's novels also serve as an epitome of signs and symbols. Most of his novels, popularly called as the Robert Langdon series which includes The Da Vinci Code, Angels and Demons, Inferno, The Lost Symbol and The Origin are filled with numerous symbols and signs. These symbols are not independent icons of imagination rather, they are a part of History, Art, Architecture and Literature, that exist in reality. As he makes effective use of the real places, things and works, Dan Brown gives life to his world of fiction by diminishing the line between fact and fiction. This research paper tends to bring out the prominent symbols of Dan Brown and how they intersect with the plot of his postmodern fiction.

**Keywords:** Post Modernism, Intertextuality, Illuminati, Architecture, Art

Literature of the Postmodern era, marked as works that were written after the period of World War II, are often characterized by certain elements namely Parody and Pastiche, Hyperreality, Metafiction, Intertextuality and Rejection of Grand Narratives. Dan Brown though a contemporary author, incorporates all the above elements of postmodernism in his novels. So far, Brown has written seven novels out of which five belongs to Robert Langdon Series. The listed novels in the series are *The Da Vinci Code*, *Angels and Demons*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Inferno* and *Origin*. All these novels are testaments of postmodern ideals and one can find the intersection of Art, Architecture, History and Literature harmoniously blended in them.

The protagonist, Robert Langdon is a Symbolology professor at Harvard University and the plots of all these novels are set in a way that, he has to decode or decipher some symbols of art, architecture and literature, either to discover some truths or to save the world from some disaster.

In *Angels and Demons* published in the year 2000, Dan Brown puts forth the anti-theological secret society Illuminati as the central symbol. Though the existence of Illuminati in the present generation is questionable, Brown uses Robert Langdon as his mouthpiece to explain about its origin and the possibility of existence. Also, he refers to Galileo, Copernicus and the plight of other scientists under the church to add credibility to his fiction. Apart from historical allusions, he also makes references of art and architecture in *Angels and Demons* such as Bernini's sculptures, Peter's Basilica, Vatican Archives, Santa Maria della Vittoria etc.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown employs ancient societies like Priory of Sion and highlights the biblical character of Mary Magdalene, to create a chaos in existing biblical claims. In addition he throughout this work used the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci as the symbols to reach the holy grail. Louvre Museum and Rosalyn Chapel to plays a key role in this novel. He also cites scientists, including Newton to give his work a touch of credibility. Since,

this work shook the base belief of Christianity through its plot and claims, it was banned in some parts of the world and is often highly critiqued.

*The Lost Symbol* (2009) is set in Washington D.C. and it deals with Noetic Science, Free Masonary and American Enlightenment writings by Franklin and Jefferson. In this work, Brown attributes fictionalized knowledge to the Freemasons. Also, masonic symbols like the double headed eagle, 33<sup>rd</sup> degree and pyramid iconography is employed in this fiction. Since, the entire novel revolves around architecture and symbols of architecture, a detailed pen picture of Library of Congress, Washington Monument and U.S.Capitol is present in the novel.

*Inferno* (2013) the fourth novel in the Robert Langdon series deals with the crisis of overpopulation and is primarily set in Florence, Italy. It also gives a detailed account of Transhumanism, a genetic process. This work can be considered as the work with most postmodern elements. The entire quest for Inferno (the virus that can alter human genetics) is based on Dante's Inferno. Map of Hell, Dante's Mask and Circles of Hell by Sandro Botticelli. The architecture of Palazzo Vecchio, Boboli Gardens and Basilica Gardens is also penned with clarity.

*Origin*, the 2017 novel is set in Spain, and deals with AI and Quantum Computers. The architectural marvel of Guggenheim Museum, La Sagrada Familia and Valle de los Caidos and Gaudi's architecture becomes a metaphysical puzzle. Literary allusions from Nietzsche and Blakes' poetry also plays a major role in this novel.

The postmodern relationship between fiction and history is an even more complex one of interaction and mutual implication. Historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction. And it is a kind of seriously ironic parody that effects both aims: the intertexts of history and fiction take on parallel (though not equal) status in the parodic reworking of the textual past of both the "world" and literature. The textual incorporation of these intertextual

past(s) as a constitutive structural element of postmodernist fiction functions as a formal marking of historicity-both literary and "worldly." (Hutcheon, 4)

Dan Brown's novels can be considered as postmodern fiction for numerous reasons. Intertextuality is present in almost all the works of Robert Langdon series. In *Inferno*, Dante's *Divine Comedy* is the driving force and all the clues for the quest of *Inferno* is from Dante's work. Similarly in *Origin* William Blake's poetry serve as the clue in the quest. Apart from Literary works, Brown also employs other forms of art as clues in his works like the painting of Da Vinci and Botticelli.

Kristeva assumes that a text is compiled as an assortment of quotations and is assimilation and a makeover of another. Intertextuality reinstates intersubjectivity. In *The Bounded Text*, Kristeva deals with the process of creating a text outside the already present discourse. The authors are not original and do not create anything from their texts from original minds but compile from the already existing texts. She explains text as a permutation of texts, intertextuality in the given text where several utterances, taken from other texts intersect and neutralize one another. (Elmo Raj, 78)

In addition to the placement of Literary Classics as clues of the quest in his works, Brown also takes the idea of his plots from existing conspiracies or narratives, and this in turn adds fuel to the fire. Brown's narrative style is captivating and through his way of writing he diminishes the line between fact and fiction which results in creating a hyperreal situation in the psyche of the readers. He writes about high profile conspiracies, for example America's claim that they have landed on the Moon is fake (*The Deception Point*), Vatican Churches hide a lot of truth about Christianity (*The Da Vinci Code*), The Illuminati myth (*Angels and Demons*) etc. Though the references he provides in these novels are fictitious, he pens them in such a convincing way that the readers tend to fall for it.

Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is closely linked to his idea of Simulacrum, which he defines as something which replaces reality with its representations. Baudrillard observes that the contemporary world is a simulacrum, where reality has been replaced by false images, to such an extent that one cannot distinguish between the real and the unreal. (Mambrool)

Another significant trait of Dan Brown's novels is that they fall under the category of Historiographic Metafiction.

Historiographical metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity." (Hutcheon, 93)

Dan Brown foregrounds all his novels on historical events, or in places with historical significance and puts forward a discourse that is capable of shaking the foundation of the historical narrative. For example, in *The Lost Symbol* he uses Freemasonry as the major the primary part of fiction and he lists out a lot of places where it is employed in the US, including the Capitol Building. This not only challenges history but also questions the cultural and architectural marvels that is known till date. Though Brown provides a lot of ideas in his novels without strong evidence, not all his ideas can be rejected as false claims. Some of his claims are true and especially with his power of description, which he exploits to describe the actual places and arts of the world, one won't be able to put them in a point where they can stand and segregate imagination and truth with different lenses. The historical references provided by him are true, such as the life history of Dante mentioned in *Inferno*, and about the poetry of Blake in *Origin*, but he does add up his imagination in the form of signs and symbols to the history of real men and that is exactly how he distorts history. Also, he uses the same strategy

in adding up imaginative symbols to monuments and building which he uses as major characters in his novels.

Thus, one can say that Dan Brown, apart from human characters makes art, culture, literature and history as primary characters which have their own voice and story to tell in his novels. And all of them click together in perfection, making his works bestsellers and counter narratives of History.

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