



السر المقدس: دراسة موضوعية في رواية "شفرة دافنشي" للروائي دان براون  
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## الملخص

نالت رواية دان براون "شفرة دافنشي" استحساناً واسع النطاق، وكان لها تأثيراً كبيراً على الأدب والثقافة، حيث تمت الإشادة بها نظراً لعناصرها المثيرة ونجاحها العالمي. يتناول هذا البحث خيارات براون الأسلوبية الفريدة، ويبحث في كيفية مزجه بين الخيال والواقع لتحدي المعتقدات التقليدية. من خلال فحص هوية يسوع المسيح، ودور مريم المجدلية، ورمزية الكأس المقدسة، وتطرق البحث إلى التأثير العميق لاستخدام براون للدين كخلفية موضوعية. إن رواية براون لم تقتصر على متعة القراءة فحسب، بل تدعو القراء أيضاً إلى البحث عن الحقيقة، وتحدي الروايات التاريخية الراسخة، لا سيما فيما يتعلق بتصوير المرأة في المسيحية المبكرة. من خلال الاستفادة من الرموز والفنون المألوفة، يأسر براون القراء ويدفعهم إلى إعادة النظر في القصص الدينية الراسخة. على الرغم من أن مساهمة براون المميزة متجذرة في الموضوعات التاريخية، إلا أنها تكمن في تقديم المفاهيم الدينية ضمن إطار خيالي مقنع، وجذب جمهور متنوع وكسب استحسان النقاد. مع الإشادة بدان براون باعتباره روائياً معاصراً بارزاً، يؤكد البحث على نجاحه في مزج الغموض والمؤامرة والحب والخطاب الديني بسلاسة. إن قدرة براون على إشراك جمهور واسع تؤكد تأثيره على الأدب، مما يعزز مكانته كشخصية مهمة في رواية القصص الحديثة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: دان براون، شفرة دافنشي، الدين

## The Holy Secret: A Thematic Study of Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code

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## Abstract

Dan Brown's widely acclaimed novel, "The Da Vinci Code," has made a significant impact on literature and culture, praised for its clever thriller elements and global success. This paper explores Brown's unique stylistic choices, investigating how he blends fiction and reality to challenge traditional beliefs. Through an examination of Jesus Christ's identity, Mary Magdalene's role, and the symbolism of the Holy Grail, the paper unveils the profound influence of Brown's strategic use of religion as a thematic backdrop. Brown's narrative not only entertains but also invites readers on a quest for truth, challenging established historical narratives, particularly concerning the portrayal of women in early Christianity. By leveraging familiar symbols and art, Brown captivates readers, prompting them to reconsider established religious stories. While rooted in historical themes, Brown's distinctive contribution lies in presenting religious concepts within a compelling fiction framework, attracting a diverse audience and earning critical acclaim.



.Recognizing Dan Brown as a preeminent contemporary novelist, the paper emphasizes his success in seamlessly blending mystery, conspiracy, love, and religious discourse. Brown's ability to engage a broad audience underscores his impact on literature, solidifying his position as a significant figure in modern storytelling.

**Keywords:** Dan Brown, The Da Vinci Code, Religion.

“This [The Da Vinci Code] is a pure genius [...] Dan Brown has to be one of the best, smartest, and most accomplished writers in the country. The Da Vinci Code is many notches above the intelligent thriller”. (Brown, 2003, p. Blurb)

The Da Vinci Code (2003) authored by Dan Brown has resonated profoundly with cultural and religious sensibilities, earning it a prominent position on the bestseller lists in the United States for a quite long time, as well as achieving widespread success in numerous countries globally. Furthermore, the novel has undergone translation into multiple languages.

Despite the sale of over eighty million copies, conservative estimates place the readership at a staggering figure of one hundred million. Additionally, the work has been adapted into a cinematic production by Ron Howard, yielding significant financial success at the box office. The narrative of the novel seamlessly weaves together elements of history, mystery, conspiracy, religion, and romantic depictions of characters and locations, contributing to its acclaim as a masterpiece of fiction.

“Dan Brown’s novel *The Da Vinci Code* has been a phenomenal bestseller, with millions of copies of the book sold in 42 languages. It’s a pace, well-structured thriller with plenty of twists and turns; a classic page-turner that’s hard to put down. A snippet of information or a clue appears in every chapter, a kind of cliff-hanger that is not immediately explained”. (Ferris, 2005, p. 7)

This quote highlights the novel's significance and its widespread acclaim for various reasons. Foremost among these is the interplay between fiction and reality, emphasized by Brown's statement to CNN in 2003 that:

“All of the architecture, the art, the secret rituals, the history, all of that is true, the Gnostic gospels. All of that is – all that is fiction, of course, is that there’s a Harvard symbologist named Robert Langdon, and all of his actions are fictionalized. But the background is true”.(Savidge, 2003)

Dan Brown invested significant effort in conducting extensive research to ensure thorough preparation for addressing potential reader inquiries, particularly given



the sensitive nature of the topic he was tackling. During his travels to Paris, he enlisted the assistance of his wife Blyth, an art historian and painter, to gather information at the Louvre, enriching the novel with authentic details.

While adept novelists commonly engage readers through literary devices and stylistic techniques, what sets Dan Brown's work apart is his ability to employ these elements strategically. His novels, including this one, fall into a distinctive category of best-selling literature by leveraging these devices to make readers more open to entertaining the notion that the portrayal of Christ in the New Testament is a deliberate cover-up orchestrated by 'the Church'.

Dan Brown skillfully achieves this impact through several methods, including selecting compelling topics for readers and elucidating the rationale behind his assertions. In his case, Brown adopts the theme of religion, presenting seemingly commonplace facts and then asserting that they were entirely fabricated.

Moreover, throughout the narrative, he subtly suggests that many widely accepted beliefs about one's religion were, in fact, constructs created by the church. By delving into the sensitive topic of religion in a fictionalized manner, Brown engages both believers and skeptics, thereby elevating the novel to best-selling status. The narrative's strategic use of religion as a thematic backdrop piques the curiosity of readers, compelling them to seek out the perceived truth behind the intricately woven storyline.

This paper systematically explores elements and aspects related to the stylistic choices and thematic elements employed by Dan Brown in this novel. It will delve into various facets, starting with an examination of the identity of Jesus Christ, then providing insights into Mary Magdalene, and concluding with an exploration of the Holy Grail and its significance. "This novel is based on the belief that Jesus was a mere man that Christianity is a despicable shame and that all claims to objective religious truth are to be avoided".(Colson, 2004, p. 45)

The exploration begins with Jesus Christ and the conceptual framework presented by the author in this novel. The pivotal inquiry posed by The Da Vinci Code revolves around the identity of Jesus Christ. Dan Brown provides his response to this fundamental question through the dialogues of his characters in the following excerpt:

"My dear,[Teabing declared] until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by his followers as a mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal."

"Not the Son of God?"



“Right, [Teabing said] Jesus’ establishment as ‘the Son of God’ was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea.”

“Hold on. You’re saying Jesus’ divinity was the result of a vote?”

“A relatively close vote at that, [Teabing added] Nonetheless, establishing Christ’s divinity was critical to the further

unification of the Roman empire and to the new Vatican power base. By officially endorsing Jesus as the Son of God, Constantine turned Jesus into a deity who existed beyond the scope of the human world, an entity whose power was unchallengeable. This not only precluded further pagan challenges to Christianity, but now the followers of Christ were able to redeem themselves only via the established sacred channel—the Roman Catholic Church”.(Brown, 2003, p. 179)

This exchange is perceived as a critique against Christianity and its doctrines. Numerous individuals fail to comprehend why Christians express significant concern over a mere thriller. However, the author contends that this work transcends the classification of a mere novel; it represents an endeavor to advocate for a distinct worldview—one that fundamentally opposes the tenets of the Christian worldview.

“But Dan Brown didn’t even get his facts about Gnosticism straight. According to the Gnostic Gospels, Jesus is a spiritual being who didn’t die on the cross; a human “substitute” was crucified by the people while the real Jesus was laughing at their ignorance. So he dealt with the two sides and chose what fits to be more interesting than mere facts in the society”.(Colson, 2004, p. 1)

In the initial chapters of the novel, Dan Brown introduces a particularly sensitive concept, which he labels a 'fact.' This intriguing notion captures the site and attention of readers, prompting them to unravel the underlying message the author wishes to convey. Notably, Brown employs a clever strategy by delving into information about codes and their significance to various nations and cultures, thereby engaging readers in a quest for deeper understanding. “paintings contain hidden levels of meaning that go well beneath the surface of the paint” (Savidge, 2003) Providing clues to a powerful and potentially dangerous secret in Christianity.

Contemporary philosophies have the potential to erode rather than enrich our understanding. The issue lies in the concept of truth being relative, suggesting that truth can be continually rediscovered through the observation of reality. Mass cultural production, exemplified by mass media, perpetuates a constant process of re-appropriation and re-contextualization of universal or familiar cultural symbols and images. This tendency can lead to a shift in our experience from reality to hyper-reality. This phenomenon is evident in *The Da Vinci Code*, where the narrative engages in a continuous interpretation of meaningful



symbols such as the Holy Grail, Mona Lisa, and The Last Supper. The novel initially presents widely accepted beliefs as 'truth' only to subsequently challenge and re-interpret them. For instance, the Holy Grail is transformed from a mere cup used during the last supper to a metaphor representing the potential marriage or bloodline of Jesus and Mary.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, Mary Magdalene assumes a crucial role in the unfolding of the narrative and the reinterpretation of established facts by Dan Brown. Distinguished among seven women in the New Testament who share the name Mary, most of whom are identified in relation to a male figure such as Mary the mother of Jesus or Mary, the mother of James, Mary Magdalene stands out for her association with a particular place rather than a man—Magdala. Unlike the other Marys who are often linked to male counterparts during their travels with Jesus Christ and his disciples, Mary Magdalene is uniquely identified by her connection to a specific location. This distinctive characteristic contributes to her role in *The Da Vinci Code* as a key figure in unraveling hidden truths and challenging traditional perspectives.

“Eighty percent of the books in America are sold to women. Mr Brown is not only a good novelist, but a smart man [...] his protagonist is a woman’s dream. A handsome, sexy man complete with an irrational fear of small spaces that just give a girl a reason to hold him close. Indeed, the whole plot is meant to appeal to the twenty-first-century post-Christian woman”. (Dobras, 2006, p. 2)

The novel's heightened popularity among women, as opposed to men, stems from its emphasis on highlighting women's contributions to early Christianity and challenging the unfavorable portrayal of one disciple in particular—Mary Magdalene. Traditionally labeled as a prostitute in Christian narratives, Dan Brown takes a divergent approach, portraying her as the potential wife of Jesus Christ. In response to inquiries about the inclusion and significance of women in his novel, Brown provided insight on his website, shedding light on the rationale behind showcasing women and their roles in the storyline.

“Two thousand years ago, we lived in a world of Gods and Goddesses. Today, we live in a world solely of Gods. Women in most cultures have been stripped of their spiritual power. The novel touches on questions of how and why this shift occurred...and on what lessons we might learn from it regarding our future”. (Brown, n.d.)

The name Mary, a contemporary variation of the Jewish name Miriam, is intricately woven into the narrative of this novel, symbolizing the significant role of women in the early chapters of the Church's history. This portrayal finds support in texts such as the Gospel of Mary, which underscores Mary's leadership position in the church—a role that historical accounts suggest was





later suppressed. The novel further explores the theory of Mary's marriage to Jesus Christ, positing that these narratives were marginalized over time to constrain the influence of women in the annals of Christianity. The unwarranted accusation of Mary as a prostitute contrasts sharply with her documented presence at the last supper and her role as one of the disciples, revealing a historical tension around the depiction and recognition of women within the context of Christian history. "The church defamed Mary, because of her familial and leadership roles, and turned her into a prostitute to limit the influence of women and to deny women the leadership role in the church Jesus had given them".(Bock, 2004, p. 126)

Indeed, women played a substantial and supportive role in the narrative of Jesus Christ. However, their significance appears to have been deliberately omitted from the historical records of the church, possibly due to a dual rationale. Firstly, the church might not have acknowledged the pivotal role of women in Christianity, influenced by the cultural norms embedded in Jewish codes that positioned women as secondary figures. Alternatively, the exclusion could be attributed to a concern that sanctity and devotion might shift from Jesus to Mary if their marital connection was affirmed. This concern extends to the potential portrayal of Mary's offspring as bearing holy blood—a topic that will be further explored in the subsequent discussion on the Holy Grail.

The novel underscores a shift from the modernist perspective, where the feminine was often considered subordinate, to the masculine. In the realm of postmodernism, there's a heightened emphasis on localism over universalism, and the feminine is granted prominence over the masculine. The narrative introduces feminist concepts, asserting the equality of men and women during Jesus's era. However, it questions why historical accounts portray men as superior to women. The answer lies in the influence of absolutism, which sought to establish dominance by concealing the truth about the marriage of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. The prevailing historical narratives, written by triumphant societies and belief systems, were selectively chosen by powerful elites, contributing to the perpetuation of a particular perspective in the New Testament. "Ancient world religions have celebrated the feminine with images that illustrate her amazing reproductive role and seductiveness to the masculine". (Miller, n.d.)

While the significance of a kiss may not hold much weight for Sophie, a key character in the novel, Dan Brown strategically introduces the question through her character and provides an answer through Teabing. Teabing explains that during the referenced time period, a kiss was a gesture exclusive to married couples, and the term "companion" carried the connotation of a spouse. This



subtle exchange aims to dispel any ambiguity surrounding Mary Magdalene's relationship with Jesus.

In unraveling the mystery, the novel highlights two quotations that underscore a deliberate effort by the church to obscure potentially threatening information about Mary Magdalene by labeling her as a prostitute:

“The presentation of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute was achieved by conflating several female characters in the New Testament accounts: Mary Magdalene, Mary of Bethany, the anointing sinner in Luke and sometimes the adulteress I John 8:1-11 were all combined into the figure of Mary Magdalene”. (Duchane, 2005, p. 46)

The church's justification for labeling Mary Magdalene as a sinner is often rooted in the story from the Gospel of Luke, where the narrative about a sinful woman precedes the verses mentioning the expulsion of seven demons from Mary Magdalene. By combining the insights from previous quotations, one can infer that the church's interpretation may be a deliberate attempt to divert attention from the possibility of a marriage between Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. The strategic placement of these narratives in the biblical text is highlighted as a means to shape a particular perception and downplay the potential significance of their relationship. “Mary was not simply one of Jesus’s followers- she was his wife and lover, with whom he produced an offspring”. (Ehrman, 2004, p. 141) So, what is the real reason behind such actions and statements by the church about Mary? Was it because the Church did not want to give a leadership role to women? Or there is something else. The answer is in the next controversial idea of Brown in this novel which is the Holy Grail.

The other attractive and controversial religious idea is the involvement of the Holy Grail by Dan Brown in this novel and the new interpretation, “Dan Brown inverts the ancient insight that a women’s body is symbolically a container and makes a container symbolically a woman’s body”. (Colson, 2004, p. 178)

Indeed, Dan Brown skillfully reinterprets the words, symbols, and historical facts that have been deeply ingrained in Christian tradition, presenting them in a compelling and thought-provoking manner. The novel introduces a fascinating and mind-bending narrative by leveraging the same iconic portrait, "The Last Supper" by Leonardo Da Vinci. According to Teabing, a key character in the novel, this masterpiece is not just a depiction of the Last Supper but is, in fact, a celebration of the Holy Grail—an idea that challenges conventional beliefs and sparks a reevaluation of established religious narratives. Brown's ability to use familiar symbols and art to weave a narrative that challenges and captivates readers adds an extra layer of intrigue to the novel. “A bit strange, don’t you think, considering that both the Bible and our standard Grail legend celebrate



this moment as the definitive arrival of the Holy Grail. Oddly, Da Vinci appears to have forgotten to paint the Cup of Christ”. (Brown, n.d., p. 236)

So how the celebration of the Holy Grail, if we consider it as a cup as it is known, is without it! Unless it wasn't a cup or a chalice. But what is the Holy Grail according to Christianity and what is the new interpretation by Dan Brown or by Da Vinci himself?

“The Grail itself is the symbol of God's grace. At once the dish of the last supper, the vessel which received the effusion of Christ's blood when his side was pierced, and in the text both chalice and ciborium, it “secrets” are the mystery of the Eucharist unveiled”. (Matarasso, 1979, p. 37)

The meaning of the Holy Grail came from the French word ‘Sangreal’ which can be read as ‘San Greal = the Holy Chalice.

According to the previous quotation, the Grail is a chalice where Jesus Christ was eating from in the last supper or the one where the Christ blood was collected by Marry and John, this opinion or FACT is not commonly known, but the one which is so popular, and all the Christians know that the Grail is the cup of Jesus Christ which he used to drink from. Therefore, it is holy and has great respect in Christianity. “according to some traditions, it was the cup from which Jesus and his disciples drank at the last supper”.(Baigent et al., 1983, p. 284) And as it is also mentioned before that Dan Brown presented his ideas in a way according to the people's collective knowledge about it then he made a dialogue among his characters 'likely a debate' and then present his new theory, to those who have no idea, in a smooth way that most of his readers forgot that it is MERELY a fiction.

Dan Brown introduced a provocative notion through one of his characters with the deliberate intent of ensuring that readers are cognizant of a fundamental tenet known to all Christians and its accessible location. In a pivotal moment, when Teabing prompted Sophie to shut her eyes and respond to a series of inquiries, one such query emerged: “How many wine glasses are on the table?” (Brown, n.d., p. 244) The answer came as “One cup, the Chalice, the cup of Christ, The Holy Grail “Jesus Passed single chalice of wine, just as modern Christians do at communion?” (Brown, n.d., p. 244) Dan Brown's astute and clever approach in employing this technique is noteworthy, as it transforms his novel into a universally accessible narrative. By introducing common Christian knowledge, possibly unfamiliar to non-Christians, and interweaving it with a series of exchanged questions between his characters, Brown adeptly addresses potential reader ambiguities. Furthermore, he proceeds to unveil previously unknown information, substantiated by live evidence, thereby offering a fresh interpretation of Da Vinci's portrayal of The Last Supper. Notably, Brown





challenges conventional perceptions by highlighting thirteen cups on the table, positing a singular cup for each participant. This pivotal revelation prompts readers to ponder the true nature of the Holy Grail, inviting them to reconsider its conventional association with a cup.

The other way that the French word 'Sangreal' can be read is 'Sang Real' which means 'Royal Blood' which leads to Jesus Christ bloodline or offspring that lead us to the link point where Jesus and Mary are meeting "Not what it is [Teabing whispered] but rather who it is. The Holy Grail is not a thing. It is, in fact, a person" (Brown, n.d., p. 244)

Mary Magdalene had been figured prominently through this work because she has a great link to the grail as well. According to certain medieval legends, Mary Magdalene brought the Holy Grail to France when she ran away from the church, "perhaps the Magdalen -the elusive woman in the gospels- was, in fact, Jesus' wife. Perhaps their union produced offspring" (Baigent et al., 1983, p. 313)

Evident from its publication date, Michael Baigent's collaborative work, "*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*", and contributions from other scholars predates Dan Brown's novel. Brown, while drawing inspiration from these sources, adopted a distinct approach by weaving the underlying idea into a narrative, intentionally utilizing fiction to enhance its impact. The manner in which Brown depicted this concept is notably imaginative, portraying the character 'Sophie' as a conduit for readers' collective curiosity and thirst for truth. Through this masterful storytelling, Brown skilfully anticipates and addresses the questions that might arise in the minds of readers as they engage with his work.

"Sophie, legend tells us the Holy Grail is a chalice-a cup. But the Grail's description as a chalice is actually an allegory to protect the true nature of the Holy Gail. This is to say, the legend uses the chalice as a metaphor for something far more important. "A woman" (Brown, n.d., p. 246)

The re-interpretation seamlessly aligns with the myth of Mary Magdalene, bearing the purported 'Royal Bloodline' of Jesus and journeying to Europe, particularly France. Dan Brown, in an interview with '*Meet The Writers-Barnes and Noble, Steve Bertrand*,' revealed his awareness of these provocative concepts, expressing a deliberate intent to disseminate them widely. While presented within the framework of his novel, the question of authenticity lingers—is it a veritable revelation or a skillfully crafted work of fiction? Nevertheless, the paramount consideration lies in Dan Brown's unparalleled success and the immense popularity he has garnered among readers. One testament to this impact is a reader's testimony, citing *The Da Vinci Code* as a



compelling force that rekindled a dormant interest in reading, underscoring the motivational influence of Brown's work.

Brown emerges as a preeminent novelist of our era, attaining success through astute and multifaceted strategies. While religion served as a pivotal element in his narrative toolkit, it was but one facet alongside the nuanced interplay of mystery, conspiracy, and love. Brown's adept use of these elements captured the attention of a diverse readership, spanning various demographic strata.

In the realm of religious discourse, particularly the exploration of the Holy Grail and its interpretations, it is noteworthy that Brown was not the trailblazer. The groundwork for such discussions was laid in 1983 by Michael Baigent and other scholars in their work, "*Holy Blood, Holy Grail*". However, this historical treatise did not garner comparable attention, largely due to its factual and non-fictional nature. In stark contrast, Brown presented these religious themes within the captivating framework of fiction, thereby attracting a broad spectrum of readers and critical acclaim. Literature serves as an open door for those endowed with creativity across its diverse genres. However, true distinction lies in the ingenuity of those who can discern the art of capturing the attention of readers, demonstrating a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that resonate with their audience.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* showcases the transformative power of fiction in challenging cultural norms and beliefs. By expertly blending history, mystery, conspiracy, and romance, Brown engages readers in a thought-provoking exploration of religious themes. Delving into the mystery of Jesus Christ's identity, pondering the significance of Mary Magdalene's role, and unraveling the symbolism surrounding the Holy Grail, the novel invites us to reconsider commonly held beliefs.

Brown's brilliance lies not just in storytelling but in strategically using religion as a thematic backdrop, urging readers to question established norms. While scholars like Michael Baigent initiated discussions on the Holy Grail in 1983, Brown innovatively presents these themes within the captivating framework of fiction.

*The Da Vinci Code* leaves a lasting impact on literature, sparking curiosity and debate, challenging historical records, and addressing gender and power dynamics in early Christianity. Brown's success, evident in the novel's popularity and critical acclaim, solidifies him as a preeminent novelist. The enduring allure of the novel lies in its ability to captivate diverse audiences, transcending traditional boundaries and fostering intellectual curiosity.



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