

Extended Essay Title:

Questioning religious perspectives: An examination of Dan Brown's novels, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*

Research Question:

How have the plots in *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*, by Dan Brown, successfully developed to question our religious perspectives from the argument the books stand for?

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Introduction

Both books, *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons* by Dan Brown are worldwide known due to the controversy they caused on religious aspects which made people to either love or hate the books. Personally speaking, my motivation for writing this essay started as soon as I finished both books because, in my eagerness of finding if someone had felt that uncertainty about their religious perspectives, I decided to do my research.

Therefore, my research question is: How are the plots in *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels and Demons*, by Dan Brown, successfully developed to question our religious perspectives from the argument the books stand for? Even though, a big part of what is written in both books can be considered unreliable given that they are based on thriller and conspiracy content, Dan Brown proves that despite the accuracy of the facts, the way they are described in the plot is well structured and developed in order to fulfil the book's purposes that are basically to question the audience from the argument of the books.

Questioning is the first step into coming to a realization, it is a fact that the books question our beliefs due to the topics they discuss. For instance; *The Da Vinci Code* refers to a prominent mystery covered by the Priory of Sion and *Angels and Demons* is about the revival of the Illuminati against the Vatican Church. Nonetheless, it is very different if people end up reaffirming their perspectives or changing them by adding new ones. In order to understand how the author makes the readers feel as if they are reading historical facts, the essay proposes a depth analysis first on an explanation of the themes; then, on the stylistic devices used and the structure of the books in general and finally, on how the books, overall, impress on distinctive audiences with varied backgrounds.

Analysis of the books

Angels and Demons is a thriller and conspiracy novel which was published for the first time in 2000 likewise The Da Vinci Code with the exception that this one was published in 2003. In Angels and Demons, Robert Langdon is called by the Vatican City to explain and solve, with the help of Vittoria Vetra, the staggering announcement received by the Illuminati which announced the explosion of the anti-matter canister in twenty-four hours and the kidnapping of four cardinals, meanwhile Il Conclave was taking place in Rome. The conflict starts with the assassination of Leonardo Vetra in the CERN and later, the main characters and the Swiss Guard start looking for the cardinals that will lead to the canister's location through symbols and clues that represent the tributes of Earth, Water, Fire and Air.

In The Da Vinci Code, the same main character, Langdon, is caught up in a mystery in Paris that pledges to reveal the so-expected location and meaning of the Holy Grail. Since the beginning, the book tries to untangle this covered event that started with the death of Jacques Saunière and continued with the tracks that he left, in order to preserve the life-changing discovery protected by the Priory of Sion. Saunière's granddaughter will join Robert and they will start the journey as fugitives, which adds more suspense to the story.

Thus, both plots guarantee the attention of the readers since the initial incident, which is a murder and a threat related to a religious controversy, is catchy and guides the whole thrilling storyline because, at first sight, the topics will cause many doubts. Besides, in both cases, Langdon is called for help and he is the one that enlightens the path for the other female characters, Sophie and Vittoria, with whom the reader can connect as they have the same feelings of uncertainty

and surprise by the anti-Christian revelations at the end of the book, that suggest that Sophie was blood-related to the Merovingian families, the bloodline of Jesus and Mary Magdalene; in the case of *The Da Vinci Code* and that the pope had had a son with a nun through insemination, in the case of *Angels and Demons*, and this son was the one in charge of the whole threat.

Throughout the books, there is plenty of evidence that backs up these conflicts. Their principal effect is the receptor's questioning and how they will perceive these events. *The Da Vinci Code* develops certain wrangles like the event where Silas, a member of the Opus Dei, practices corporal mortification. This bloody action causes amaze because it is described as a shocking event by a member of the church; part of that negative conception is because Silas is the antagonist and responsible for Saunière's murder, so that idea influences on the thoughts the readers have about that practice which is considered orthodox nowadays and it questions the audience if it is a good practice and why it is validated by the church.

Additionally, the book explores on the eternal search of the Holy Grail and there is a point where the characters feel necessary to comprehend first the origins of the Priory of Sion, in order to know if their journey is going to be worth the way, this belief is described when: "Langdon grinned. "Nobody knows for sure, but the one thing on which all academics agree is this: The Knights discovered *something* down there in the ruins...something that made them wealthy and powerful beyond anyone's wildest imagination.'" (Brown, 2003, p. 211).

This quote guides the plot due to the analogy presented that relates the purpose of the Templar's search with the one the characters are currently facing, it also provides a feeling of relief because Sophie will know that there is hope on finding

that kept secret for many years, even though, from a religious base, she thought that the Templars had followed orders in the Middle age to protect pilgrims in the Holy Land which represents the basic conception of a religious belief that the readers perhaps feel, as well. In that case, the author proves that it is possible to develop a fictional idea upon a historical event with unclosed information such as the crusades that took place in a real context but still raised many questions about what truly happened; so the receptors will face perplexities to choose between changing their perspectives to the one the book suggests or continuing believing in their religious background.

Furthermore, that idea is seen in *Angels and Demons* in the presented text: “Still, as they fell deeper in love, although they could resist the temptations of the flesh, they both found themselves longing for something they never expected—to participate in God’s ultimate miracle of creation—a child.” (Brown, 2003, p. 650). The idea says that this child represented a miracle and not a sinful action since technically the Pope was still chaste nonetheless, as explained before, the development of the characters is remarkable because they expose a conflict of questioning if this is considered as a break from celibacy or an action of love by God that makes the audience feel the same due to a connection of empathy to the topic.

Basically, in *Angels and Demons* there are many times where the morality of the church is questioned for instance when Robert talks about the Ecstasy of St. Teresa and how this nun represents a sexual encounter, rather than a spiritual one, with an angel. That idea can be judged by the readers because nuns represent a symbol of divinity and purity. In that sense, the choice of topics arouses curiosity on the ones that are reading the books because they will feel

the same conflicts that the characters are facing and they will question if their beliefs are able to solve their doubts and if not what the solution could be.

Aside from that, not every opinion related to the church is criticized because if that were the case, all the doubts wouldn't be coherent; so there is indeed a part where the Camerlengo exposes his dislike to the current relationship between science and religion and he says: ““And all the while, you proclaim the church is ignorant. But who is more ignorant? The man who cannot define lightning or the man who does not respect its awesome power?” (Brown, 2003, p. 463).

He is holding up to the idea that the essence of the religion can't be denied with science and showing his concern on the desire of many to put one in front of other when both, science and religion, can work together and complement each other. He mentions a clear example and evidence of a dualism conflict in the book that it is seen firstly, on the title “Angels” and “Demons” and later, when the characters and the readers faced bewilderment to decide whether science represents a path of light or dark, and the same for the church. In that way, the Camerlengo's comment generates not only a reflection about the tolerance people should have on both sides, but on top of that, it generates a clever discussion for the readers based on a metaphor that contributes to the complete and wider development of the story through the plot.

Moving along with the narrative structure, in general lines, his style of basic writing and use of cliff-hangers, make the readers focus on the content of the story that he is telling. One of the stylistic devices to convince people that what is written feels real is the way Dan Brown narrates events, for instance, Langdon keeps comparing every action that happens and gives a historical background as the events are developing which makes someone doubt about how the story can

represent a repetitive pattern throughout the history of these religious figures (The Vatican, Opus Dei).

In addition, the use of dates is a clear example of a feature that acknowledges an event that is considered real for the characters. From the perspective of Angels and Demons, Robert tends to explain certain facts to Vittoria and the Swiss Guard. For instance, “Yes. But in the 1500s, a group of men in Rome fought back against the church. Some of Italy’s most enlightened men—physicists, mathematicians, astronomers—began meeting secretly to share their concerns about the church’s inaccurate teachings.” (Brown, 2003, p. 54). The language used is easy to understand the general idea of the quotation: enlightened people discussed the church’s fallacies; proving that there has always been an open dispute between science and religion. Indeed, the dates are a device that backup the purpose of the ideas and explain a posture in which one has to choose between science or religion so the reader starts wondering which perspective is more important and to what extent the church can spread inaccurate ideas.

The time and space of the story play a role on the conception of a belief because it is a technique that will catch the reader’s attention in general and once they are connected to the story, it will be easier to impact them on a religious basis. As well, the use of real places causes a feeling of reality on what someone is possibly imaging and as a consequence, the story presented could be real as it happened in a context that could make it possible. In Angels and Demons, the reader travels through all Rome due to the use of descriptive language when there are references to the location of famous architectural places in Rome.

“In the center of the piazza rose Caligula’s 350-ton Egyptian obelisk. It stretched eighty-one feet skyward to the pyramidal apex onto which was affixed a hollow

iron cross. Sufficiently high to catch the last of the evening sun, the cross shone as if magic..." (Brown, 2003, p. 367).

In that case, it describes the obelisk in St. Peter's Square that approaches the development of the story because the topic of the anti-matter canister could take place in a different context but it happens on the Vatican City, a symbol that represents the core of Christianity, so the use of symbols through places, dates and characters are essential to connect with the topics.

Meanwhile, in *The Da Vinci Code*, the same pattern of dates is presented when Langdon explains Sophie the members that were part of the Priory of Sion: "Da Vinci presided over the Priory between 1510 and 1519 as the brotherhood's Grand Master, which might help explain your grandfather's passion for Leonardo's work." (Brown, 2003, p. 152). The quote emphasizes on well-respected members of the organization and uses years to prove the given information, which can be a reliability tool considering that Saunière was part of the organization.

The influence of using dates is the narration of an event in a historical way, that confuses the receptor and they will see it like that and forget that the novel focuses on the attempt of Langdon and Sophie to discover the Holy Grail. Additionally, in this book the time and place don't determine completely the context and impact of the story developed but there's an influence on the language that some characters use, for example, Robert is a historian which means that the knowledge he has about these topics is mainly true in the novel nevertheless, anyone can perceive that the way he narrates the event feels as if the writer himself is selling that perspective and an idea that generates

vagueness and keeps from differentiating until what part the events written are fiction. This idea can be supported by the following quote:

““[...] I thought the Templars were created to protect the Holy Land.”

“A common misconception. The idea of protection of pilgrims was the *guise* under which the Templars ran their mission. Their true goal in the Holy Land was to retrieve the documents from beneath the ruins of the temple.””(Brown, 2003, p. 211).

The firmness and determined position of Robert shown in that quote transmits security on what he is saying. The language in the book is simple, conclusive and specific consequently, it works out the conception of a new perspective that teases the faith of many.

Additionally, as the storyline is taking place, the main character is connecting the events with a fictional background so when a new event arrives, there's already an explanation based on the argument the book follows, which has similar patterns with reality, causing the receptor to ask if that same event could be partially real . For instance, when Sophie and Robert were at Teabing's study and he tells Sophie that the “women” alongside Jesus was Mary Magdalene, it senses as a conclusion or a fact that has followed a background because the book mentions a well-kept secret for many years and that Leonardo Da Vinci was part of the Priory of Sion. Therefore, summing up in that idea seems reasonable, as there is a fair justification and a huge revelation that was uncovered but most importantly a new perspective that, again, is teasing with the faith of the receptors.

Impact of the books

The impact of the novels is measured by noticing its scope on various readers therefore various backgrounds. Being able to write a story that keeps causing internal conflicts and guides people's imagination to another level by describing astonishing events on a regular context is more of what a writer can ask for and it simply suggests a real fulfilment of the author's purpose. Both books are developed upon regular questions that people tend to ask themselves about their faith, their way of seeing the world through a religious perspective and that message is what makes the books remarkable because developing the capacity of questioning is a process that guides one into a truth. Hence, the books are just a media that generate doubts in order to awake a sense of curiosity, identity and reflection on the ones who are reading them. Moreover, what makes the books such a controversy, especially in the case of *The Da Vinci Code*, is the way the revelations arise throughout the plot and how it can disconcert our religious beliefs.

Firstly, for those who are narrow-minded, the books are a complete fallacy that present an image of Jesus and Christianity as an insult; in addition, they consider that most part of what it is written in the books is under false statements. If the plot suggests that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a family or that the orthodox Camerlengo Ventresca was the responsible for the events in the Vatican City, it is evident that people who are principled with their religion but most importantly with their faith, will feel attacked and react against it because from their perspective, the author is "criticizing" that Christian idolatry that they share.

Thus, it is certainly difficult to write about religious topics because the books don't use a proper language or aren't the right media to completely satisfy the divinity

of religious systems and due to the sensitive reactions that both books might cause, especially when there is a conflict about if it is disrespectful to develop these conspiracies. Among the different opinions, one that particularly stands is the following:

“You must, however, go to the heart of the issue and ask, “Do you think the author presented an honest, accurate portrait of Christ and Christianity?” If the person’s response has even a hint of the positive, you’ll have much work to do, beginning with an explanation of some important basics of the Christian faith, such as the deity of Christ, which is clearly denied in the novel.” (Maier, 2004, p. 2)

Paul Maier is referring to how *The Da Vinci Code* didn’t transmit at all the essence of Christianity nor the principles of this religion; in that way according to his perspective, people are only able to question their religious beliefs if they aren’t Christians or aren’t firm with their faith. Nonetheless, I believe that at some level this opinion is partly emotional because to just asked whether there’s a possibility that the book contains valuable information isn’t an anti-Christian act, every opinion has the potential to be reaffirmed or denied if they are treated with flexibility and attention. Besides, the book isn’t describing the history of Christianity as a historical prove or states a thesis that in fact, Jesus is related to the Merovingian family, it only follows the structure of a thriller and fictional novel and presents opinions and situations that are only considered real in the book, however it can be confusing since the author stresses on the idea that this fictional storyline moves forward in another direction but starts from a regular context.

Secondly, it is also important to mention that these religious doubts can be presented on people that know nothing about these topics, so for them, it would

be easy to believe the argument of the book since they don't have previous knowledge of the topics that are developed. This is an integrity conflict that the author may face because he stills writes the novels knowing that part of his audience can completely believe what the book is telling. However, I consider that this isn't completely the author's problem but the responsibility of the readers because they have to be aware that if they are willing to read these books, they need to have at least general knowledge of what the Bible says, the purpose of Christianity, the organizations that take part in the story such as the CERN, the Opus Dei and what their function is. This information won't be seen during the whole books or in the author's notes, only general information will be given.

For that reason, I believe this is when the problem begins because, as people don't know exactly what events are real, they get confused when the plot is already developing and the conflicts are taking action. Hence, it is important to review some topics because this will lead to right questioning process if not all the possible doubts would be based on people's ignorance.

Furthermore, this idea is not only for these books but also for every particular topic in life because it shouldn't be a possibility to provide or produce powerful knowledge based on disinformation or ignorance. To complement this concerning issue, one evidence where *Angels and Demons* narrates an inaccurate historical event is when it mentions that Copernicus was murdered by the Church, this is a far-fetched idea because in reality, he died due to a stroke the same year he published his major work about heliocentrism.

This emphasizes the idea of informing before reading the books to have the ability to differentiate the events. Nevertheless, that part is analyzed from a historical perspective that, although in some way, it could impact on the religious image a

reader has about Christianity, the books develop a scope based on an emotional ground build upon the reader's critical interpretation and their perception of the story with a view to question, not necessarily change, their perspectives on concepts suchlike their faith or the purpose of religion.

Finally, another valuable comment is the one by Ross Douthat (2009) who briefly describes in an opinion article published by the New York Times that part of the plot and story in general, indulges the thoughts of alternative Christians and examples of Americans with modern faith.

As a consequence, Dan Brown's audience shows the faith level of 21st-century Americans and that those beliefs are criticized for the ones who aren't that open-minded. In that sense, these receptors hope to come to a realization only based on the books and assuming that these are enough proves to create new idols of religiousness when the essence of the books isn't to prove something but to raise religious questions due to the disputable arguments both books stand for, and due to the way they are written thereby the audience in the end, felt all the journey and learnt valuable things.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Angels and Demons* and *The Da Vinci Code* are novels that successfully develop their plots in order to lead to effective questioning processes and conflicts between the religious background of the receptor and the storyline that the books stand for. The attention of the readers is guaranteed since the beginning of the story and it is due to the use of cliff-hangers and to the accurate choice of topics, that the books create a lot of hesitations. The development of the characters is essential to understand certain patterns that the readers may feel as well, such as the internal conflicts they feel when the anti-Christian revelations arrive and the perplexity when the author deepens on fictional ideas based on unclosed events.

In addition, the use of basic writing techniques but with a firm and conclusive language catches every reader who is interested in conspiratorial and religious topics. The use of symbols and metaphors like the definition of the Church as an Angel or a Demon is what awakes that feeling of curiosity and reflection, moreover, the impact of both books is described as the first step to discover a truth and the doubts generated by the books should be considered with tolerance and flexibility from the perspective of people who are principled with their faith and from people that aren't correctly informed but get carried away with the plots of the books; because this is the only way in which the readers are able to complete a critical analysis about their faith, their beliefs and the essence of religions.

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