BOUNDARIES OF FACT AND FICTION IN THE WORLD OF DAN BROWN'S *THE DA VINCI CODE*

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to solve the controversy concerning *The Da Vinci Code*. Many years ago, this novel was banned because it discusses a delicate religious issue concerning Christianity in general and Jesus Christ in particular. The whole dilemma did not only start when Brown suggested that Jesus Christ has an offspring, but it was aggravated when Brown declared that these claims are facts and therefore the novel is far away from being fictious. This assertion was frankly mentioned in the prologue of the book under the title the "FACT" page. Such an assertion shifts the novel to another level of critical analysis that is to consider every character, event and organization in the novel as a real one. Whereas, the functionality of this novel is limited only to color some real events in order to attract readers to complete reading. This caused the novel to face the heat of a counter campaign by the Church and its supporters that described the novel as a complete failure. A third part in this dilemma is the reading audience who liked the novel so much to the extent that it came on the top of the charts of bestselling books for many months. Thus, the question that needs to be studied focuses on the reason for the huge success of the novel. Is it for the "facts" that it narrates? Is it for Brown's narrative techniques? Or is it for another reason that will be found by a thorough study of the novel?

KEYWORDS: *The Da Vinci Code,* Boundaries of fiction, Mary Magdalene, Jesus Christ

INTRODUCTION

Studying and surveying different books, articles and dissertations that study Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, one can notice that almost all of them can safely fit into one of two classes. The first revolves around accusing Brown of writing a diabolic work that aims to question people's faith and make them doubt their long believed Christian principles. This explains the endless attacks and recommendations of avoiding reading and even much better banning the novel for good. The second is a trend that deeply believes in and insists on *The Da Vinci Code* to be addressed and studied as a literary masterpiece that is difficult to be compared to any other literary work. This trend even goes to the extreme to set the novel to be the first of its genre that can hardly fit with other literary or even documentary works.

To the researcher, both of these trends lack objectivity. The first of them focuses on the content only, or even worse it focuses on two specific ideas in their analysis, namely the nature of the relationship between Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene, and the other is the possible existence of an offspring due to this relation. Thus, neglecting any other fictional or factual sides of the novel all together. The other class of critics and readers highly praise Brown's narrative techniques and literary style of writing in addressing critical and difficult religious issues in a thriller work that they never get bored while reading no matter how bulky the novel is.

Thus, this research addresses this novel through studying its theme with all its introduced ideas along with analyzing its narrative sides in order to set away out to this controversy. This is achieved mainly by clearly defining the literary fictious boundaries and the other factious and religious boundaries that Brown either kept or broke. By doing this, the researcher believes that once those boundaries are clearly set to readers of the novel, the novel will no longer be problematic and controversial as it has always been.

Up to the researcher's best knowledge, no research paper before has addressed this issue in studying and analyzing Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

To study and to literary analyze the fictional world of Dan Brown's The *Da Vinci Code* from a new perspective that allows readers and critics to place the novel in accurate literary, social and critical contexts.

METHODS

Studying Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* in an objective tone requires the researcher to read a lot of articles, books, interviews, reviews and dissertations. Not only about the novel itself, the novelist, his bibliography, and the different views about the huge dilemma caused by the novel, but it also requires the researcher to read deeply in some Christian critical ideas and concepts, narrative theories and even researching the true color of some existing social, religious, historical and economic organizations mentioned in the novel. Thus, the interdisciplinary approach was adopted to enable the researcher to cover the different aspects of the research. The interdisciplinary approach allows the researcher to cover the different boundaries of studying the religious ideas addressed in the novel along with the literary techniques used to present these ideas as well as investigating the response of the readers and the recipients to *The Da Vinci Code.*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

"It is the romance of history which attracts the half educated and secures the publisher"

("The Perils of Historical Narrative")

"Books can't possibly compete with centuries of established history" (The Da Vinci Code)

In March 2005, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Archbishop of Genoa, took time while speaking on Vatican Radio to offer an emphatic and pithy denunciation of *The Da Vinci Code*. He frankly and directly asked the listeners for two things. First, "do not buy it", and in case you already did, then "do not read the novel". Later on, Bertone elaborated on his remarks. "The novel", he claims, "aims to discredit the church and its history through gross and absurd manipulations". The novel's chief danger lays in its massive popularity. "The book is everywhere"; "you can't be a modern youth without reading it". (Mexall, 1085)

Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* is not just a popular success, it is an unparalleled phenomenon. Readers have been all touched by the modern frenzy, which may have climaxed in May 2006 with the success of the film version. Even though readers have all heard enough about the book over the last few years to last a life time, there is always the more reason to ask the big question why it is so amazingly popular?

This research paper seeks to tackle this challenging question by resorting to deconstruct the novel as a try to capture the book's undoubted qualities as a powerful and seductive thriller novel as well as speculating more broadly later

about how and why it appeals to certain needs in our present culture. Along the way, this paper studies the reasons why this novel was labeled a 'dangerous fiction' or just simply a highly motivated attack on history in general and historical Christianity in particular.

Before examining *The Da Vinci Code* and its problematic relationship to history, reality, Christianity and literary canon, a brief focused summary of the novel is necessary. *The Da Vinci Code* opens with the murder of the Louvre's curator, Jacques Sauniere, who is the grand master of the secret society, the Priory of Sion. An agent of the Roman Catholic Church murders Sauniere after he discloses to an agent the location of the priory's most valuable possession, the Sangreal.

Although Sauniere's information leads the agent on a wild goose chase, Sauniere must have passed on the Sangreal true location to people who can be trusted. Before he dies of his wounds, Sauniere arranges an elaborated set of riddles to be solved by Robert Langdon, Harvard Professor of symbology, and Sauniere's granddaughter, Sophie Nevue, cryptologist for the Paris Police. Sauniere designs these riddles such that only Langdon and Nevue will discover the truth of the Sangreal, not the Church.

Langdon, who was to meet Sauniere that evening is summoned by the police and becomes the prime suspect for Sauniere's murder since the police believes that Sauniere's codes reveal Langdon as the murderer. Langdon is saved before accidently incriminating himself by Nevue, who has already seen the codes left by Sauniere and has interpreted a different meaning. Langdon and Nevue maneuver about the museum, solving riddles and avoiding police detection, until they acquire the priory keystone, which reveals the true location of the Sangreal.

During a feverish race across Paris to stay ahead of both the French police and Church agents, Langdon and Nevue acquire the assistance of Sir Leigh Teabing, a famous grail historian. Langdon and Teabing inform Nevue of her grandfather's position within the Priory and the society's history, which includes Leonardo Da Vinci as a former leader who sprinkled clues within his artwork about the Sangreal's true nature. Teabing and Landon finally explain the Sangreal, which is a set of documents proving Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child; the Church is after the Sangreal because its content could destroy the church's authority.

As the trio continue to solve riddles to unlock the keystone, their chase finally leads to Westminster Abbey, which houses the tomb of Sir Isaac Newton, a former priory Grand Master. Teabing admits to being the engineer of Sauniere's murder in hopes of luring the keystone into his possession but is entrapped by the authorities while Langdon solves the final riddle. Even though the fabled Sangreal documents are not found, Nevue knows that she is the Holy Grail as her father is descended from Jesus and Mary's bloodline.

With this background, the researcher can now assess the themes that are introduced throughout the novel in order to answer the previously noted questions. The first theme is simply that authority cannot be trusted. This applies primarily for religious authority. One explanation given for this attitude is that the recent church has led a severe attack against the novel, labeling it as a devil work of imminent danger. Priests and many Christian books and papers have been devoted for so many years to disgrace and to discredit Dan Brown and his *Da Vinci Code*. No matter how far they truly and honestly reflect their right to defend Christianity, no one can ignore the endless warnings and even threats against reading the novel. Simply because the church has a considerable authority over many people worldwide, the novel was banned officially or even unofficially out of any potential fear of guilt by disobeying the authority of the church.

Another theme related to the lack of trust in authority is that the winners can easily write history. This idea seeks to dismantle the study of history because what has been passed down cannot be trusted because it is totally biased. If what has been passed down as truth cannot be trusted, then it stands to reason that any and every other possibility could likely be true. This makes conspiracy theories plausible, and *The Da Vinci Code* is full of them. Apparent in this theme is that the winners write a slanted history that is totally biased. In the perfect world, history would be written by people who are passionate about their field of study but seeking only truth of it no matter what.

Considering the previously mentioned themes in *The Da Vinci Code,* one may easily notice that the concept of any objective truth whether religious or historical is of a great matter when analyzing and studying this novel in particular. In his appearance on the *Today Show* in 2003, Brown was directly asked "How much of this is based on reality in terms of things that actually occurred?" Brown replied frankly by claiming that "absolutely all of it... Robert Langdon is fictional, but all of the art, architecture, secret rituals, secret societies, all of that is a historical fact" *(Today Show).*

In another interview with Brown, he was asked to imagine writing *The Da Vinci Code* "as a nonfiction book rather than a novel how it would have been different? Host Charlie Gibson asked. Dan Brown responded, "I don't think it would have". Moreover Brown adds, "The reason for its bestseller status simply lies in the interplay between narrative history and fiction" *(Good Morning America).*

Actually the novel indeed has introduced a new cultural dimension where the nonacademic public can come together and critically debate what forms a fictional work of art. Moreover, how narrative fiction has shaped what is known and recognized as a historical fiction. This public debate caused by *The Da Vinci Code* in the popular press and in online forums such as *Amazon. Com's* "Customer Reviews" reveals a serious need to clarify the boundaries between subjective fictional narrative and objective historical facts. In these non academic public spaces, the debate was mainly limited to the degree to which history and fiction are intertwined into one narrative discourse upholding the novel as the matrix that united those discoveries in their imagination.

The Da Vinci Code begins with a page titled "Fact", a term that sets the stage for many controversial pre-concepts about the novel. The three brief paragraphs that follow are clear assertions: there is a secret society called the Priory of Sion to which figures from Isaac Newton to Leonardo Da Vinci may have belonged; a suspicious organization affiliated with the Vatican called Opus Dei has been accused of using illegal and questionable ways to attract and keep members and has just spent $47 million building its headquarters in New York; and finally "all description of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate" *(The Da Vinci Code,* 15*).*

Bearing in mind that *The Da Vinci Code* is just a famous novel and thus it must resort to fictious names, places and events or else it would have been classified as either a non-fiction or even a documentary novel; yet Dan Brown takes his claims as dead serious! In an interview for *WCVB TV's "Chronicle"* with Mary Richardson, Dan Brown says, "When I started researching *The Da Vinci Code* I really was skeptical, and I expected on some level to disprove all of this history that's unearthed in the books. But after three trips to Paris, and a lot of interviews, I became a believer" *(Dan Brown Official Website).*

No matter what Dan Brown really meant in the "Fact" page, this introductory page makes no statement whatsoever about any of the ancient theories discussed by fictional characters throughout the novel. It looks that interpreting those ideas is left to the readers regardless of their different cultural and religious backgrounds. The "Fact"

page, as quoted above, claims that the descriptions are accurate, though it does leave "organizations" out of its list. At least, readers interested in accuracy should do some additional research before accepting this work of fiction as their gospel.

It is clear to see how *The Da Vinci Code*, as a novel, has an entertainment value, at least to those who can bring themselves to think of literature as a fictious world. Yet, it is not known for its truth value as a well-researched non-fiction book would have or should have. And, it does not pretend to be one. Brown's personal website even addresses this very issue by clarifying that:

> *The Da Vinci Code* **is a novel and therefore a work of fiction. While the book's characters and their actions are obviously not real, the artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel all exist (for example, Leonardo Da Vinci's paintings, the Gnostic Gospel, Hieros, Gamos, etc). These real elements are interpreted and debated by fictional characters. While it is my belief that some of the theories discussed by these characters may have merit, each individual reader must explore these characters' viewpoints and come to his or her own interpretations. My hope in writing this novel was that the story would serve as a catalyst and a springboard for people to discuss the important topics of faith, religion, and history** (*The Da Vinci Code, FAQs)*

Actually*, the Da Vinci Code* does raise its readers' interest in occidental history and encourages them to engage in their own research. The few large and the many small controversies that this novel has created are in fact its main contribution to related fictious disciplines. The following analysis will discuss some of the main historical claims, groups and important subjects in *The Da Vinci Code* and some of their fictious aspects. These claims are in fact what Brown has described as undisputable facts.

The first of all is what Brown mentioned in *The Da Vinci Code* as a secret society named The Priory of Sion. To Brown, The Priory of Sion is an undercover society to which Sir Isaac Newton, Leonardo Da Vinci and many other prominent names belong. It is like - as presented in the novel- an organization whose momentous duty includes nurturing and protecting the bloodline of the Christ's descendants who are alive in modern times.

Although Dan Brown's book is a novel, he insists, right from the very beginning of the book, that The Priory of Sion is a real organization. To most readers this claim is utterly astonishing. How then could such an organization have been in existence for nearly a thousand year without it becoming known to historians, even if not to the general public? In fact, The Priory of Sion, or as also known as the Order of the Rose-Cross, was borrowed from a fictional document written by Henri Lobineau. According to this document, The Priory of Sion was found in 1188 by Jean de Gisors who called himself Jean II. No other historical document has verified the existence of the so called The Priory of Sion.

In the article *"Unraveling the Da Vinci Code*", Tammie M. Kennedy clarifies in detail the common mistake that considers the historically existing Order of the Sion as the doubted Priory of Sion. Kennedy says that

> **In 1982, Michael Baigent, Henry Lincoln and Richard Leigh published The Holy Blood and The Holy Grail. This book, which contained the story of Mary Magdalene's flight to France and the supposed line of descent of the kings of France from Christ, first introduced the story of Rennne-le-Château to English language readers. The authors' old considerable amount of research to verify the account of the origins of the Priory of Sion (Prieuré de Sion) They came across some charters confirming the existence of an Order of Sion in the twelfth century. But the Order of Sion is not necessary the same as the Priory of Sion, and**

they have not been able to cite any medieval document that includes the words Prieuré de Sion. (Kennedy, 121)

One can argue that because the Priory of Sion was a secret society, care would have been taken to limit the writing of documents that might fall into the wrong hands. But if the organization was anything other than a fake one with an attractive title, there surely would have been some activity that lefts its record At the very least, there must have been some contact between members, either in person or by correspondence, to arrange for the continuity of the organization. Yet, nothing relating to the Priory of Sion has ever been found in any historical document.

Nevertheless, Brown presented The Priory of Sion as a real well-known historical organization. Moreover, Brown focuses on this doubted idea to prove other historically doubted groups and events such as the Knights of Templar. Based on the lack of evidence and taking that into account, critics are convinced with the conclusion that The Priory of Sion is just a pure fiction which is used by Brown to solidify the semi-historical nature that Brown seeks to add.

The second idea that Brown introduces throughout the pages of his novel as fact number two is the assumed Vatican prelature known as Opus Dei. To Brown's world, Opus Dei is a deeply devout Catholic sect that has been the main topic for so much controversy due to reports of brainwashing, coercion, and a serious practice known as "corporal mortification" *(The Da Vinci Code,*1). This terrifying idea is embodied in the character of Silas, an Opus Dei albino "monk" who killed the only four people who knew where the keystone was hidden. He further killed a nun inside Saint-Sulpice since he was brainwashed to believe that "She was working against God! She scorned the work of Opus Dei" *(The Da Vinci Code, 166).*

What a frightening image that Brown portrays for a religious institution, what is more frightening is that he brilliantly mixed certain historical facts with fictious events in a literary matrix that convinced many readers to accept as true historical facts full of bloody events.

In his detailed study "Examining Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code Claims*" Andrew Corbett studies the origin, the nature and even the lexical meaning of Opus Dei. Opus Dei is a Latin word for the work of God. It can never be described as sect or a cult or a Catholic Church. It is more like a personal prelature within the Catholic Church. All members of Opus Dei are subject to their local Catholic bishop, who in turn is under the Pope. (Carbett, 2).

Clarifying the whole idea of Opus Dei, one can notify that it does not include any monks (as Brown portrayed and repeated all over the novel), not to mention an albino frightening, enormous killer or otherwise. Opus Dei is more like an organization helping Catholics to live out their faith in their daily lives. Actually, Opus Dei was founded by St. Josemarie Escriva in 1928. His classic devotional book *The Way* has been widely read and it is the way many people are introduced to Opus Dei. "There is no brainwashing", Corbett highlights, "Coercion, or dangerous practices unless one thinks living the faith in love, doing good, making sacrifices, preaching the gospel involves such things" (2).

Opus Dei, according to *The Da Vinci Code,* is a terrorist organization that has helped to 'bail out' the Vatican Bank using millions of dollars. In response to this serious claim, Opus Dei clarified that as it is mentioned earlier that its sole role is limited to carrying out special and specific pastoral activities and has nothing to do with Vatican financial issues. In his detailed study of the most controversial issues in the Catholic Church, John Allen states that

Neither Opus Dei nor any of its members helped 'bail out' the Vatican Bank. The church authorities made Opus Dei a personal prelature in 1982 because they recognized that this new canonical category was a good

> **fit for Opus Dei's mission and structure ... the personal prelature status is nothing special: it is simply one**
> **of several canonical categories the church has for designating an institution that carries out special pastoral**
> **activities (Allen)**

The main problem with *The Da Vinci Code* is that it basically depends on rumors, doubted sources and suspicious ideas about Opus Dei to build around its plot and main events and characters. To mention some, Opus Dei does not assassinate people nor wash the brains of the living just to drive them to commit dirty acts and criminal works as Brown portrayed skillfully in his novel. This would only be accepted if people read *The Da Vinci Code* as a novel where fiction plays a major role. However, Brown's assertion that the novel is a historical fact changes the criteria for reading, analyzing and criticizing the novel. Assuming it as a historical fact leads to nothing but one thing only, dealing with its events as historical facts as well and that is exactly what did not happen at all.

Instead of considering it a historical fact, one can safely say that *The Da Vinci Code* does raise its readers' interest in history and keeps motivating them to read about the events narrated throughout its pages. Even the few large controversies have created a challenge too many critics to read further and deeper to support or even to attack what seem to be historical facts to Brown.

One of the most controversial figures that Brown portrayed is Leonardo Da Vinci himself. Da Vinci as portrayed by Brown is a "flamboyant homosexual, a worshipper of Nature's divine order, and this placed him in a perpetual state of sin against God" *(The Da Vinci Code,* 45). Moreover, Da Vinci served in the novel as one of the main founders of the secret society called The Priory of Sion. Not only this, but also his famous painting *The Last Supper* is a hidden message in the way to solve the secret of the sacred feminine. *The Last Supper* by DaVinci is a concrete evidence for the reader to prove that Jesus and Magdalene was a pair. "The one seated in the place of honor, at the right hand of Jesus, in *The Last Supper* has flowing red hair, delicate folded hands, and the hints of a bosom; it is without doubt a female, the woman is Mary Magdalene". (*The Da Vinci Code,* 243)

Even supposedly admitting that Leonardo thought that the person sitting next to Christ in *The Last Supper* was a woman, and then a long list of questions must be answered. First, why should this lady be Mary Magdalene? Why should Mary Magdalene participate in the Last Supper? What is/are the evidence(s) to prove that Leonardo was a member of the "Priory of Sion"? Finally, why did not Magdalene or any of her "bloodline" govern the church since? Each of these questions must be answered separately but unfortunately to Brown there is no evidence to support any suggested possible answer.

Moreover, Dan Brown (forgot) to mention in *The Da Vinci Code* that Leonardo Da Vinci gave an explicit confession of Catholic faith. At the end of his life, Leonardo repented and confessed. He was no longer some kind of arch-heretic who worshipped the goddess. And his art was explicitly biblical and Catholic with no hidden "codes" required. Many examples of his later works prove this idea, such as, *The Annunciation* (tempera on wood c.1472-75, oil on panel c. 1478-82), *Benois Madonna* (c.1478), *Adoration of the Magi* (c.1481-82), *St.Jerome* (c.1482), *The Madonna (Virgin)of the Rocks* (c.1483-85), *The Last Supper* (1495-1498), *The Virgin and Child with St. Anne* (charcoal and oil), *St. John the Baptist* (c.1513-1516) and possibly other works. The Leonardo biographer Bramly also comments

> **The will appears to confirm this return to religion. Leonardo commends his soul to Almighty God, to the**
> **Blessed Virgin Mary, to Saint Michael and all angels and saints in paradise. The first wishes he expresses**

are pious arrangements for his burial. He asks to be interred at the church of Saint-Florentine in Amboise; that his coffin be carried by the chaplains of this church and followed by the prior, the curates, the minor friars of the church; that three high masses be celebrated by the deacon and sub deacon, and thirty low Georgian masses at Saint Florentine and Saint Denis (Bramly, 406).

What has been clarified about Leonardo Da Vinci is like other previously mentioned examples in *The Da Vinci Code.* All of them highlight the clearly blurred boundaries between facts and fiction in *The Da Vinci Code* unlike what Brown keeps asserting and emphasizing in many occasions whether in *The Da Vinci Code* itself or in other interviews and articles.

The novel has also raised many critically historical and religious claims. Some of these claims can be simply described as falsification of history while others were considered a direct offence against many Christians especially those directed against Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene.

Dan Brown adopted the idea that Jesus Christ has married St. Mary Magdalene and they have kids. Moreover their bloodline exists till now. Moreover, this claim is not even a side story that is mentioned on the margin of the plot of the novel, it is rather the main plot upon which the whole story, characters and events evolve. Here, one should really wonder whether this is the appropriate literary matrix to discuss such a delicate topic. Brown is not a specialist of Christian history nor is *The Da Vinci Code* a documentary novel. Furthermore, Brown's insistence on the credibility and the truth of the story events with all of its previously mentioned doubts and historical mistakes raises many questions and doubts about this point as well.

One of Brown's claims concerning critical religious points in *The Da Vinci Code* is that there were more than eighty gospels considered for the New Testament (*The Da Vinci Code*, 231). In *The Da Vinci Code* three gospels are mentioned that did not make it into the New Testament. *The Da Vinci Code* is correct when it states that there were gospels that did not make it into the New Testament, but it is incorrect with the number. It is an overestimation to say the least. According to Bart Erhman the number of the gospels is "at least a couple of dozen" (49). This is an example of what *The Da Vinci Code* frequently does, overstates its case and uses really doubted data to do so. Although it is easy enough to see why eighty sounds much stronger than seventeen, it is a flaw in the argument. Perhaps Dan Brown should be given the benefit of the doubt because he may have confused gospels with other writings that did not make it into the New Testament.

The other claim that *The Da Vinci Code* propagates is that there was a smear campaign against St. Mary Magdalene. Brown suggested that the church has dealt with St.Mary Magdalene as an infamous lady with a sordid reputation. Furthermore, Brown claims that the church has long dishonored her and disgraced her name. Thus, the novel showed Brown's efforts to defend St. Mary Magdalene and to give her some of the credit she deserves. In his detailed study entitled "Examining Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* claims" Andrew Corbett dedicates many pages and goes through many books that focus on this point in particular. He frankly declares that:

There is no smear campaign against St. Mary Magdalene. She is a celebrated saint in the Catholic Church. She is the first human witness of the empty tomb and the Resurrected Christ in the canonical gospels (Matt 28:1ff; Mark 16:1,9; Luke 24:1 ff; John 20:1 ff,18), and was with Him at the Crucifixion and His burial (John 19:25; Matt 27:55 ff; Mark 15:40 ff). She was a *close disciple* or follower of Jesus and one of several

"Marys" (Mariam or Miriam was a common name) mentioned in the New Testament. Many Catholic and Orthodox and Episcopal churches have been built honoring her name through centuries (for example, Parish Church of St. Mary Magdalene in England, The Russian Maria Magdalena, the Anglo Catholic Church of St. Mary Magdalene in Canada, and many other St. Mary Magdalene Catholic churches named in her honor in the U.S. and all over the world). (9)

It is obvious then if there is any smear campaign and silencing of St. Mary Magdalene going on, the Catholic Church and the rest of Christianity are certainly incompetent about keeping her name quiet. On the contrary, they do not keep her "secret" or defame her. Moreover, she is a part of the liturgical calendar in Catholicism (her feast day is July 22).

At least five book-length studies have devoted themselves to making this simple point: *The Da Vinci Code* is a novel, and should be read only as such. Focusing on the scattered grains of truth that exist in many pages of the novel will never change its fictious nature into a fatuous one. Nor does Brown's assertions at the beginning of the novel that all of the descriptions and the events of the novel are accurate.

Actually, Brown's claims of authenticity has caused him to raise the ire of Catholics and conservative Christians as well as the wild interest of curious readers to track down the "conspiracy" presented in the novel. The novel certainly has something for everyone, and too much for many readers and critics. *The Da Vinci Code* is full of puzzles, riddles, anagrams, art, historical mysteries, and multiple conspiracy theories that allowed the novel to break all previous sales records. The book reached No.1 on the *New York Times* bestseller list on April 6, 2003, and has stayed on the list for one hundred and three weeks. (Sheaffer, 22)

The phenomenon that has become the sales history of *The Da Vinci Code* is still growing, even at the time of this writing. There have been numerous television specials, which try to explore the secrets contained in the plot of the novel. Tourists are paying thousands of dollars to go to "Da Vinci Code" tours. Essentially, *The Da Vinci Code* has become an industry in and of itself. Yet, the engine that drives this industry is not the revolution of the hidden secrets, nor is it the resurrection of the beauty as celebrated through art. *The Da Vinci Code* industry is driven by Brown's use of narrating techniques of writing and his imagery in portraying his characters.

The narrative of *The Da Vinci Code* is essentially a number of connected plots brilliantly culminating in Langdon's discovery, at the end of the novel, of the final resting place of the Holy Grail. However, the structure of the narrative of the novel is a little bit difficult to be grasped at certain points of each of these interwoven plots. Interestingly, each sub-plot in *The Da Vinci Code* is marked by a chapter division highlighting the character's focus of the part of the narrative, creating a sense of multiple events which occur in the same moment, and a clear chronology when one event is followed by the next. The very beginning of the narrative is not at chapter one at all, it starts with the prologue.

Essential to the structure of the major plot, the prologue tells the painful death of Jacques Sauniere in the Louvre at the hands of Silas the albino monk. The excitement begins from the prologue. Readers start asking who is the killer as well as the victim? Why did this murder happen? And finally why Sauniere chose to die naked and posed like Leonardo Da Vinci's famous painting, the Vitruvian Man, with a cryptic message written beside his body and a pentacle drawn on his chest in his own blood? Since then till the very end of the novel, the reader tries hard to solve the mysterious crime, to decode the endless challenges and to learn more about the case together with the main characters.

At the heart of *The Da Vinci Code* is a quest for the true Holy Grail. It is an old quest for an elusive truth that has remained hidden to all but a selected few. People seem to gravitate toward this quest for the truth. One of the reasons that the book has been so popular is that it allows people to join the heroes in their journey for the truth. Moreover, readers are invited to solve the riddles, given time to reach conclusions and even update their information and modify their opinions about the characters as long as they move forward with the plot.

In their search for the grail, readers along with Brown face many historical and religious realities side by side with imaginary colored events drawn by the novelist himself. Even the characters in Brown's books are often named after real people in Brown's life. For example, Robert Langdon is named after John Langdon, the artist who created the am bigrams used for the *Angels & Demons* CD and novel. Camerlengo Carlo Ventresca is named after "On a Claire Day" cartoonist friend Carlo Ventresca. In the Vatican Archives, Langdon recalls a wedding of two people named Dick and Connie, which are the names of his parents. Robert Langdon's editor Jonas Faukman, is named after Brown's real life editor Jason Kaufman. Brown also said that characters were based on a New Hampshire librarian, and a French teacher at Exeter, Andre Vernet. Cardinal Aldo Baggia, in Angels and Demons, is named after Aldo Baggia, instructor of modern languages at Phillips Exeter Academy.

Not only the names of the characters in the novel, many places, institutions and organizations do still exist in reality. Opus Dei, Priory of Sion, the church and the museum where the events took place and finally some of the Christian concepts mentioned in the novel. In an interview with Matt Lauer on *The Today Show* in September 2009, Brown responded by saying, "I do something very intentional and specific in these books. And that is to blend fact and fiction in a very modern and efficient style, to tell a story. There are some people, who understand what I do, and they sort of get on the train and go for a ride and have a great time, and there are other people who should probably just read somebody else ". (7)

That is what Dan Brown actually masters; he always adds something extra to his novels besides an original, fast-paced plot. Brown does explore unique themes/topics like the mysteries of the Holy Grail and other topics that many novelists fear to tread. This actually adds tremendous depth to his storyline, yet the fact that some readers take his work too seriously makes many people doubt the validity of his works. No matter how excellent Brown's background research might be, his books still are fiction where one is required to suspend belief to some degree to be seduced to completely believe that *The Da Vinci Code* is a historical documentary work based on some true facts, events, names and characters mentioned in the novel. Readers must not forget the fictious matrix where all these elements are united.

Misunderstanding the blurred discrepancy between what is fictious and what is factious led the novel to receive many negative reviews from Catholic and other Christian communities as well as generated severe critical views against the novel. These negative views revolve mainly around the level of research Brown did when writing *The Da Vinci Code*. *New York Times* writer Laura Miller characterized the novel as "based on notorious hoax", "rank nonsense", and "bogus", saying the book is heavily based on the fabrications of Pierre Plantard, who is asserted to have created the Priory of Sion in 1956. (*The Da Vinci Crock*, 4).

Such accusations were aggravated to the extent of accusing Brown of distorting and fabricating history on purpose. Marcia Ford writes:

> **Regardless of whether you agree with Brown's conclusions, it's clear that his history is largely fanciful, which means he and his publisher have violated a long-held if unspoken agreement with the reader: Fiction that purports to present historical facts should be researched as carefully as a notification book would be (3).**

Similar critics and readers believe that Brown disagrees with Christianity to the point of completely rewriting a vast number of historical and religious events. And making the matter worse has been Brown's willingness to pass off his ideas as facts with which many readers agree. This idea is embodied in the "FACT" page at the beginning of the novel which has been proved earlier in this research paper to include many mistaken ideas and misleading information.

At the same time, it is also undeniable that Dan Brown has created a literary work of extreme enthusiasm which he filled with riddles and code breaking. It is a thriller in which the reader is asked to read carefully every detail and to work his brain to help Robert Langdon in his great discovery. David Lazarus of *The San Francisco Chronicle* says, "This story has many twists- all satisfying, most unexpecting - that it would be a sin to reveal too much of the plot in advance. Let's just say that if this novel doesn't get your pulse racing, you need to check your meds". (8)

Maybe *The Da Vinci Code* does not constitute what can be best known as a literary masterpiece, at least not in the traditional sense of a meaningful exploration of the human condition, as so many celebrated works of the literary canon did and still do. Nor is it a documentary work that can be considered a record of correct and exact historical and religious era. *The Da Vinci Code* is rather a fast-paced mystery novel that would never have become the subject of the endless controversy had it not been for the religious nature of its plot that suggests among other things that Jesus Christ had fathered offspring.

The Da Vinci Code is a real interesting work of art where Dan Brown intentionally and cleverly masters blending the boundaries of facts and fiction to attract various readers with different cultural, social and religious backgrounds. Once readers get that idea clearly and know for sure that *The Da Vinci Code* does include real and historical facts side by side with imaginary ones in order to create a fictional world not to explore a real existing one, the dialectical and the controversial aura that usually surrounds its name will cease to exist.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude this research paper, *The Da Vinci Code* would only be a nice, well-written thriller that can even be classified as a masterpiece if it wasn't for Dan Brown's assertion that everything within it is based on fact and is historically accurate. Since he does this, the novel deserves to be held to account through the rigor of examination based on what is known to be clearly historical fact. In this test *The Da Vinci Code* fails miserably. Yet, this does not deny that once a reader or a critic addresses the novel as a thriller that is based on fiction and the mere coincidence that some of its events and character might have similarity with the real world, it will dominate other literary works. Moreover, the novel might be one of the leading literary works in this field. Nevertheless, none of this will be news to the reader who's Christianity rests not on whether or not there really is a Holy Grail, but on the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit deep within his/her heart and soul.

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