

An Analysis of Metaphorical Symbols in The Da Vinci Code

WeiJia Hao^{1,a,*}, Siyue Sun²

¹College of Literature and Journalism, Chengdu University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610106, China

²Media College, Xin Yang Normal University, Xinyang, Henan, 464000, China

a. haoweijia@stu.cdu.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: When explaining the story background and process of the novel *The Da Vinci Code*, the author Dan Brown describes the knowledge of semiotics, religion, culture, art and many other aspects incisively and vividly, and there are also many signs in the text. In *The Da Vinci Code*, it is the story plot containing various metaphorical symbols that can make it more wonderful. Peirce, known as the “father of semiotics”, was a famous semiotician who devoted his life to the theoretical research of semiotics and the application of semiotics in related categories. His “three-part” method of signs created a new perspective of semiotics research, made great contributions to the in-depth development of semiotics, and also provided a reference value for the theoretical framework of religious semiotics research. Using Peirce’s “sign tripartite method”, we can divide the signs involved in Dan Brown’s *Da Vinci Code* into three metaphorical symbols: star metaphorical symbol, flower metaphorical symbol and holy Grail metaphorical symbol. Through the analysis of the commonality and individuality of these signs, we can get the interpretation of the interlocking sign network in *The Da Vinci Code*, and finally summarize the role of these signs in the construction of the theme.

Keywords: metaphorical symbols, *The Da Vinci Code*, theme

1. Introduction

Ferdinand de Saussure was the first to use the term “semiotics” to refer to the study of the function of signs in the socially productive existence of humans. Semiotics is defined as “the study of signs” at the beginning of Daniel Chandler’s book “Semiotics: The Basics,” and Victoria Welby suggested that semiotics should actually be referred to as the philosophy of meaning or significance [1]. Semiotics has steadily evolved into two streams, one representing structural linguistics, as represented by Saussure and Roland Barthes, and the other, philosophical semiotics, as represented by Charles Sanders Santiago Peirce and Ernst Cassirer [2]. Based on Peirce’s semiotic theory, this essay will examine how metaphorical symbols contribute to the novel *The Da Vinci Code*’s overall theme.

Everything in semiotics is divided into three categories by Peirce. Index, icon and (metaphorical)symbols can all be broken down into their individual elements, the subject, the symbol and the interpretant [3,4]. For the reason that no developmental process can be completed in a binary, according to Peirce, because a road with three bifurcations can have any number of endpoints, in contrast to a line segment with one end coming after the other, which can only create two endpoints. The three-part division of a sign overcomes Saussure’s binary classification of “Signifier -signified,” which makes the building of symbols more adaptable and versatile. It also solves the fundamental

semiotic paradox of “a word/symbol must have an object.” Peirce also put forth the idea of “infinite semiosis” of signs, which states that while the process of signification is theoretically infinite and that each symbol’s interpretation must be completed by another symbol, the meaning of symbols may be interrupted at the real level but it can never be completely terminated [3,5].

The Da Vinci Code, which has a captivating plot and has smashed the local bestselling sales record in the United States, is the emblematic work of American author Dan Brown. *The Da Vinci Code* is based on Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu’s quest to solve the mystery left by Jacques Saunière, the deceased director of the Louvre Museum, and to discover the location of the Holy Grail. Numerous signs and codes are woven into the text of the book to serve as hints towards resolving the mystery [2].

Semiotics is a specialized field, yet it already has a developed research methodology and theoretical framework. This theory can be used to analyze the metaphorical symbolism of *The Da Vinci Code*, thus enriching the previous research ideas and conclusions and offers a more varied analytical viewpoint for reasearching Dan Brown’s and even other contemporary fiction writers’ works.

The object of study chosen for this paper is the metaphorical symbols in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*. Regarding metaphorical symbols, Peirce defines it as “it is the use of one concept to represent another more abstract concept by means of association, symbolism and other techniques” [3].

The majority of previous studies have examined fiction from the narratological point of view, and the few papers that have included semiotics have only provided a single interpretation of the symbols’ meanings or how they helped the plot develop.

This book’s semiotics research has a lot of unexplored territory and the problem of being incomplete and flawed. Based on the aforementioned issues, this essay will not only focus on symbol interpretation but also on examining the link between individual symbols in the novel as well as the connection between symbols and meanings. Using this information as a foundation, this essay will attempt to examine how these symbols contribute to the development of the novel’s overall theme. As a result, it will improve semiotics-based textual research and fill in the deficiencies and gaps in the thematic study of *The Da Vinci Code*.

2. Abstract Graphic Metaphorical Symbols - Pentagrams and Hexagrams

The pentagram first occurs at the start of the book *The Da Vinci Code* when Jacques Saunière, the dying director of the Louvre Museum, draws a pentagram on his bare body with blood that is centered on his navel. The pentagram has a wealth of metaphorical imagery. A number of stories will come after this one [6]. The novel’s opening character, Jacques Saunière, also serves as the story’s founder and inventor of the secret. The alleged “Da Vinci Code” starts with a string of hints that Saulnier himself left behind before his passing [7].

In the novel, it is mentioned that Venus moves through the sky every eight years as a pentagram. The ancients observed this phenomenon and were in awe of it. To honor the magic of Venus, the Greeks organized the Olympic Games on an eight-year cycle. Because Venus also symbolizes Venus, the goddess of female sex and beauty, the pentagram has always been considered a symbol of beauty and perfection, and is associated with goddesses and divine women [8].

The hexagram in *The Da Vinci Code* is interpreted as the “Holy Grail” on the top, representing the woman, and the “sword blade” on the bottom, representing the man. “Sword blade” is represented as a regular equilateral triangle, and “Grail” is represented as an inverted equilateral triangle, which represents the equality and integration of men and women in the novel, foreshadowing the following introduction that the hexagram star is also the representative sign of the Priory of Sion symbols, which may lay the groundwork for its mysterious ritual.

Although the hexagram and pentagram are very similar in shape, their meanings are very different. Over the millennia, the symbolism of the hexagram has been demonically distorted. The hexagram, known as the Star of David, is considered a sign of the devil and a symbol of heresy in Christianity.

But the hexagram is not actually a symbol of the evil Satan, it is a symbol of Jewish pride. The hexagram originates from the ancient Hindu sect "TANTRISM", where the idols worshipped are a combination of male root and female root, the former is an upward equicircular-triangle, while the latter is a downward inverted triangle. In this sect, the hexagram is considered an auspicious picture, with the pointed upward triangle representing the male and the downward triangle representing the female. The combination of the two not only represents the combination of Yin and Yang, but also a symbol of life and reincarnation.

In the 17th century, the hexagram became a unifying symbol for the Jewish people, as a symbol of masculine and feminine energy, and later became a symbol of goddess worship [9]. With this special cultural symbol, it breaks through the original plot structure mode, increases the classic and high elegance of the detective novel theme which is mainly popular, and realizes the transformation of the novel plot to the theme meaning. The theme of the novel not only becomes stronger, but also becomes more elegant and popular [10].

In early Europe, the oldest characteristic of the rose was its pentagonal symmetry, with five petals. Symbolizing Venus as the guiding star. The pentagram, Langdon explains at the beginning of the story, "represents the feminine half of all things-a concept that religious historians call the 'divine female' or 'divine goddess.'" In its most specific interpretation, the pentagram symbolizes Venus, the goddess of female love and beauty." In other words, the pentagram, together with the hexagram, are symbols of the divine feminine.

3. Floral Metaphorical Symbols--French Lilies and Roses

3.1. Sacred Feminine Veneration Meaning of the French Lily

The French lily and the initials P.S. make comprise the logo and iconography of the Priory of Sion (Prieuré de Sion in French), a fictitious underground organization that worships the Divine Feminine. The majority of the church's leaders are well-known historical figures, including Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and the director of the Louvre Museum, Jacques Saunière. The group holds that the stigmatizing and evilizing propaganda campaigns of later male rulers have permanently obliterated the status of the Goddess in Christianity [8]. These facts have been protected by and carried by Prieuré de Sion for thousands of years.

The main character, Robert Langdon, also uses his words to show how the French lily and the painting "Mona Lisa" are related in the book. The French word for a French lily is "fleur de lis," where "lis" is pronounced similarly to the word "Lisa" in English. The name "Lisa" is both the second half of the well-known Mona-Lisa painting by Leonardo da Vinci and the old script pronunciation of Isis, the goddess of female reproduction [8].

The final letter of the title of the artwork, "Mona," is produced by putting the initials of the word "Amon," the name of the god of male reproduction [8]. It is evident that the ideas of feminine worship and equality between men and women were represented in the paintings and symbols of both Leonardo da Vinci and the Prieuré de Sion. The French flower, which is a significant symbol in Prieuré de Sion, sounds like to the word "Isis" and denotes the veneration of goddesses.

3.2. The Rich Metaphorical Meaning of the Rose

The rose has been a symbol with deep meaning since antiquity. First of all, the rose is typically associated with women in many circumstances. This is because one of the oldest roses, the five-petal

rose, has a pentagonal shape that is symmetrical and resembles Venus' orbit. So the five-petaled rose is related to Venus, the goddess of love and beauty in Roman mythology.

Additionally, the rose is a significant representation of female fertility. The five petals of the rose, which also resemble the female genitalia in appearance, were frequently used during the early goddess cult to symbolize the five stages of a woman's life: birth, menstruation, childbearing, menopause, and death [8]. Everyone also arrived on earth with the blooming of this rose. Many languages of Latin origin spell the word "rose" as "rose". by putting the last letter of the word "rose" at the front, it becomes Eros, the Greek god of love. So the rose is also strongly identified with the divine feminine [8].

The meaning "secret" is also associated with the rose. The Latin word for secrecy (sub rosa) literally means "under the rose" [8]. To indicate that a meeting was to be kept confidential, ancient Romans used to hang roses on their doors. The Prieuré de Sion frequently refers to the Holy Grail as a rose throughout the book; this is a reference to the word "secret"'s figurative meaning. From the meaning of "under the rose", the symbol of the rose also has the function of an index symbol. In the book, countless Grail seekers strive to uncover the true Grail wealth hidden beneath a certain rose symbol.

In fact, the rose symbol indeed has the meaning of "direction", and the most fundamental navigational instrument is still known as a "Compass rose" today. This instrument developed from a "wind rose map" and is used to determine the direction of the wind and the direction of the sea. During navigation, it is a crucial tool for determining the wind's direction and the ship's course. The chart's circle of thirty-two dots, which resembles the thirty-two petals of a rose, inspired the name of the object.

4. The Holy Grail Metaphorical Symbol

Since the Middle Ages, the Holy Grail has existed in various possible forms, and the exploration and pursuit of the Grail has fascinated many people. Many Chinese and foreign legends have mentioned the Holy Grail, believing that if you can find the Grail, drink the water contained in the Grail will have the magic of rejuvenation, death or immortality. This legend has widely influenced many contemporary literature, movies, games and other works.

The most traditional interpretation of the Holy Grail is "the chalice used to hold the blood of the crucified Jesus when he was crucified." Meanwhile, opinions differ as to the true meaning of the Holy Grail. Others interpret the Holy Grail as "the chalice from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper." From the manifestation of the specific meaning of the Holy Grail, it has even been proposed that the Holy Grail is not necessarily the cup, but the skull of Jesus.

But the archetype of the "Holy Grail" in the novel is a more complex metaphorical symbolic image. In Biblical allusions, the "Eucharist" is one of the most common Christian rituals, in which red wine is consumed to represent the blood of Christ. The Arthurian version of the legend is based on a story that suggests that the cup was believed to have God-like magical powers because of the special ritual of the crucifixion. But in *The Da Vinci Code*, this story is completely rewritten: Jesus Christ married Mary Magdalene as his wife, and gave birth to offspring in France, Mary Magdalene is the legendary Holy Grail, and its descendants are its holy blood tradition, and the heroine of the story Sophie represents the royal lineage, which is the holy Grail they have been searching for [8].

In *The Da Vinci Code*, the Holy Grail is not, as previously believed, the cup used by Jesus at the Last Supper. In fact, the "Holy Grail" is actually one person - Mary Magdalene [8]. The legend of the "Holy Grail of Jesus' blood" actually says that before Jesus was crucified, Mary Magdalene conceived a child of Jesus' royal blood.

In the later stories of *The Da Vinci Code*, the search for the Holy Grail becomes a top priority. In the background of Da Vinci's "Last Supper", there is a hidden "Holy Grail" sign. In the picture, Jesus

is seated in the center, and the saint sitting to the left of Jesus is actually a woman, that is, Jesus' wife, Mary Magdalene. The space between her and Jesus forms the shape of a V. This V-shaped sign is a clever use of the Holy Grail metaphor [8].

After being buried for thousands of years, the truth of the Grail's secrets has finally been revealed. Mary and Jesus had a daughter. The belief of the Priory of Sion in the novel is to protect the Holy Grail, and this holy Grail is the remains of Mary and the extensive written evidence of the words and deeds of Jesus and Mary. The Holy Grail symbol, as a metaphor, actually refers to Mary Magdalene, Jesus' spouse, and the secret that Jesus had a daughter with her [8]. It is precisely because the Holy Grail metaphorical symbol is at the end of a series of cryptographic burial, with mystery and attraction, that the protagonists Langdon and Sophie continue to meet the difficulties of decryption and pursuit

5. Discussion

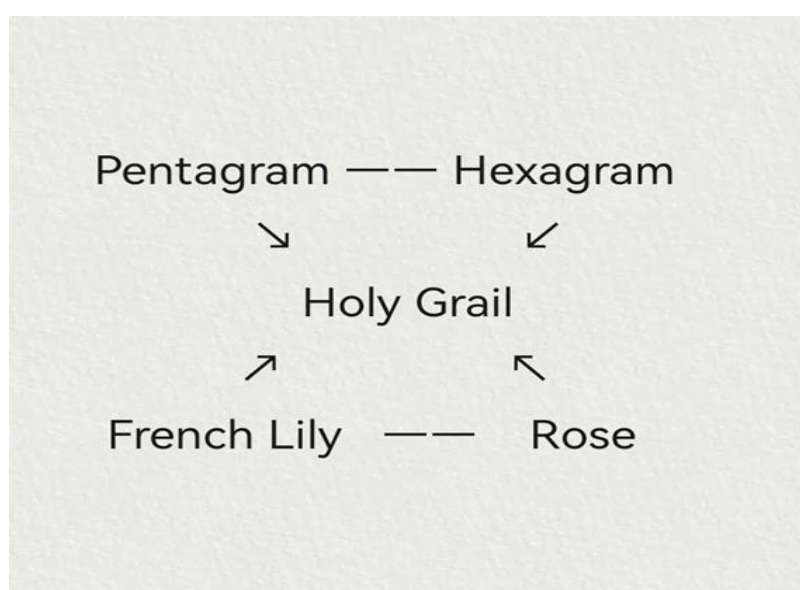


Figure 1: Structure of the metaphorical symbols of *The Da Vinci Code* (Original).

5.1. Interpretation of the Symbol Structure Diagram

With the five symbols described above, a schematic depicting their hourglass-like structure can be created.

The pentagram is positioned at the top since it first appears in the fiction, as seen in Figure 1. Although the hexagram emerges later, the two elements of the sign, the orthogonal and inverted triangles, appear in the first half of the story and are thus put beside the pentagram. The pentagram and the hexagram are connected by lines because they are both abstract shapes which have meanings related to the divine feminine and male-female harmony. The Holy Grail, as the most important metaphorical symbol of the novel, is the ultimate meaning of all the other symbols, so it is located in the center, and the other four symbols are pointing to it. The French lily and the rose are related to one another because they both resemble flowers, which are figurative, and have associations with the divine feminine.

The protagonists, Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu, set out on a mission to discover the Holy Grail's secret as the connotations of the two symbols, the pentagram and the hexagram, are revealed. The storyline keeps developing, as if the sand in an hourglass were to flow from the top to the bottom. However, the sand only goes through the center, much as the actual meaning of the Holy Grail remains unidentified although being addressed occasionally in the book.

Eventually, as the sand keeps flowing down, it indicates that the novel's plot is nearing its conclusion, Robert Langdon and Sophie Neveu are continually discovering the true significance of the French lilies and roses, and the Prieuré de Sion's true nature is finally revealed, just as all the sand accumulates in the bottom half of the hourglass, creating a strong foundation for disclosing the Holy Grail's mystery.

5.2. The Role of Metaphorical Symbols in the Construction of Fiction

Applying Pierce's trichotomy of symbolic meaning, object—symbol—interpretant, to the metaphorical symbols in this work will reveal the overall theme.

According to the interpretant, the five symbols presented in this paper all feature the goddess of wisdom, the ideal woman, and the harmony and unity of men and women. This summarizes the theme of the call for gender equality and the restoration of women's rights [11].

The interpretation of a sign is somewhat influenced by people's subjective perceptions of the sign from the perspective of how the interpretant is acquired. The deconstruction and subversive interpretation of the Holy Grail, a crucial Christian symbol, is a reflection of the fact that people are rapidly losing trust in religion and experiencing spiritual desolation as a result of social transformations, wars, and sectarian conflicts. Thus, a summary of the issue of lack of faith and social spiritual crises is possible [12].

The novel's surface issue is advocating for women's rights and illuminating the spiritual crises of contemporary society. A more comprehensive summary of the two is possible. The deconstruction of the Holy Grail symbol can be seen as a revolt against church authority, i.e., the "decentering" of church power, and the call for women's rights can be seen as a revolt against male authority, i.e., the "decentralizing" of male authority. This further summarizes the theme of the novel as decentralization, the promotion of "the other."

Because of this, the novel exhibits a Poststructuralism tendency in its theme, representing people's desire for social equality as well as their recovery of the "absent" and "neglected" discourse over the period of thousands of years. On the other side, the theme also symbolizes the search of humanism and personal ideals by contemporary people.

6. Conclusion

This paper discovers that the pentagram symbol, the hexagram symbol, the French lily symbol, the rose symbol, and the Holy grail symbol all contain the meanings of goddess worship and women's rights calling. This was done by analyzing the meanings and relationships of the five most representative metaphorical symbols in *The Da Vinci Code*. These five symbols combine to create an hourglass-shaped symbol structure diagram, with the Holy grail symbol at its heart. These metaphorical symbols also contribute to the construction of the novel's theme, giving it a "decentralizing" character that reflects contemporary research and advocacy of humanism and social equality.

The relationship between metaphorical symbols and their function in the development of the novel's theme are further investigated in this paper, breaking through the restrictions of earlier research papers that only focused on the interpretation of symbolic meanings. As a result, the collection of papers on semiotics and *The Da Vinci Code* is enriched, and new perspectives and ideas are provided for the study of semiotics.

The definition of the metaphorical symbols in this essay is still debatable due to the ambiguity in Pierce's semiotics regarding the categorization criteria of symbols. Given space constraints, this study will not go into greater detail on the numerous additional symbols in *The Da Vinci Code* that still have research worth and potential for interpretation. The significance and connections of other

symbols, as well as how these symbols relate to one another and how they affect the novel's theme, can all be thoroughly explored in future research.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

References

- [1] Sun, L. (2018). *An exploration of the semiotics of the movie da vinci code*. *Youth Literator*, 05, 132–133.
- [2] Hu, Y., & Zhang, W. T. (2015). *An exploration of religious symbols in The Da Vinci Code*. *Home Drama*, 08, 280–281.
- [3] Peirce, S. C. (2014). *Pierce: On symbols* (X. Z., Zhao, Trans.). Chengdu: Sichuan University Press. (1996).
- [4] Feng, W., & Lu, J. D. (2012). *An examination of the religious symbolic likeness of The Da Vinci Code*. *Journal of Changzhou University (Social Science Edition)*, 04(13), 93–95.
- [5] Zhao, Y. H. (2016). *Semiotics principles & problems*. Nanjing University Press.
- [6] Zhang, S. H. (2017). *An analysis of the narrative art of The Da Vinci Code*. *Journal of Chifeng University (Philosophy and Social Science Chinese Edition)*, 07(38), 112–114.
- [7] Xu, H. T. (2017). *Analyzing religious symbols in The Da Vinci Code based on peirce's semiotic theory* (MA thesis, East China Normal University). WWW.Cnki.Net. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=BaYza4XbGEI2dKa5QD6HlhvxEiv7XGrSqK6KPyFGCvB-3MK4WQuS3YMiu8PJFi18hpR2pWY-r-oU8A4PD6dcpcVDp3vJUuwvYrFxSe8ncfj_7JpZrkL9eXmiRpUi022XzZILGoNcE=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS
- [8] Brown, D. (2009). *The Da Vinci Code*. People's Literature Publishing House.
- [9] Gao, S. J. (2014). *The divine feminine in dan brown's The Da Vinci Code*. *Modern Communication*, 12, 64–65.
- [10] Chu, Y. Y. (2013). *Interpretation of The Da Vinci Code in the threshold of cognitive semiotics* (MA thesis, Hefei University of Technology). WWW.Cnki.Net. https://kns.cnki.net/kcms2/article/abstract?v=BaYza4XbGELWarY2SV4sKY5-RtUgFIsIqElh8gyPUuD6HVsnCTXhM2C-sPnXHurdmHaMtMIUnuGzoIDM--7VsU6D7bnmmXF_qIEA82eI_1WFNTsFEaVhkVletaG-eHA2IDi2-jph_JU=&uniplatform=NZKPT&language=CHS
- [11] Giannini, J. (2008). *The sacred secret: The real mystery in The Da Vinci Code*. *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*, 02(02), 63–84.
- [12] Zhu, Z. W. (2005). *Decoding the unprecedented success of dan brown's creation*. *Journal of Shanghai University (Social Sciences Edition)*, 04, 42–46.