Beyond Backdrops: Decoding the Role of Cities in Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons*

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ABSTRACT

Dan Brown, the acclaimed American novelist, masterfully integrates the essence of cities as dynamic characters in his narratives, transforming them into crucial elements that drive his stories forward. This article explores the profound interplay between architecture and literature in Brown's work, A*ngels and Demons*, emphasizing how cities become active participants, influencing characters, and propelling them through intricate plots. Through meticulous research and vivid descriptions, Brown immerses readers in a historical architectural city such as Rome, making it integral to the unfolding narrative. The portrayal of architecture in Brown's novel goes beyond being a backdrop; it becomes a metaphorical representation of the struggle between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, science and religion. This symbolic richness invites readers to think more deeply and enhances the overall reading experience.

KEYWORDS

Dan Brown; Architecture; Urban landscapes; City narratives; Historical mysteries.

Language goes beyond the simple function of transmitting information, being intrinsically linked to aspects that involve and define individual and social-human relations (Arraes, 2011). It is understood that a text carries, within itself, ideologies that represent reality and become a means of reflection on it. The authors of novels are literary cartographers, who make the work of fiction realistic and flourishing by not only describing the city as text but also presenting maps as an aid to the narration and in the process of involving the total reader experience.

Architecture is never meant to be a physical or material form. It is a way of expressing, communicating, and creating meaning. Architecture can help us understand how literature reflects, responds to, or challenges the spatial, temporal, and social dimensions of media (Jazar, 2018). Architecture can also help us explore how literature creates new forms of life, such as characters, narratives, genres, etc. (Pericoli, 2013). Architecture has been portrayed in the literature in various ways. One way is using literary architectures, which are the architectures present in literary texts (Frank, 1983; Gehlot et al, 2018). These literary architectures are conceived by writers with the technical conditions and aesthetic particularities of the literary medium, resulting in a different experience compared to building architectures that can be experienced first-hand.

Spurr (2012) argues that literary architecture is a useful concept for analyzing literature because it reveals the connections between the spatial and the verbal, the material and the textual, the physical and the mental. Another way is to use architecture as a medium, where architecture is used as a tool for analyzing media transformations in literature. This approach explores the presence of architecture in literature by considering the modes of architecture and using interpretative frameworks to analyze its representation. Architecture can be seen as a medium that shapes and is shaped by culture, society, and history (Gehlot et al, 2018).

The portrayal of architecture in the narration is one of the main elements in Dan Brown's novel. He is a renowned American novelist who expertly explores the intricate relationship between science and religion in his literary works. Within his narratives, Brown masterfully intertwines these seemingly disparate themes, crafting captivating and thought-provoking stories. Dan Brown's captivating storytelling often revolves around the fictional character Robert Langdon, a symbology professor at Harvard University. Each plot takes readers on a thrilling journey through different characters, historical cities, puzzles, and intricate storylines. Langdon enters, *Angels and Demons,* tasked with thwarting a Vatican conspiracy orchestrated by the Illuminati. Teaming up with a scientist, Vittoria Vetra, they unravel scientific clues and ancient symbols in Rome to prevent a catastrophe. Rome serves as a central and integral element of the story, with the Vatican City at its heart.

The plot unfolds against the backdrop of a papal conclave, where four cardinals are kidnapped by a secret society called the Illuminati. As the protagonist, Robert Langdon, races against time to save the Vatican from destruction, the city's historical significance and architectural wonders come to life. From the majestic St. Peter's Basilica to the enigmatic Pantheon, each location becomes a crucial piece in the puzzle that Langdon must decipher to thwart the nefarious plot. Rome's rich history, religious symbolism, and iconic landmarks heighten the tension and drama of the narrative, making it inseparable from the story's fabric.

He skilfully navigates the realms of intellectual puzzles and symbolism, where scientific and religious elements harmoniously coexist, creating compelling narratives. He states:

> Science and religion were not enemies, but rather allies - two different languages telling the same story, a story of symmetry and balance... heaven and hell, night and day, hot and cold, God and Satan. Both science and religion rejoiced in God's symmetry... the endless contest of light and dark (Brown 33)

Brown's profound understanding of historical references enriches his novels, infusing them with a tapestry of past events, thus adding authenticity and depth to his exploration of the intersection of science and religion. His thought-provoking writings have ignited discussions and debates, leaving a lasting imprint on popular culture, and prompting contemplation of the enigmatic connection between science and faith.

In addition to his fascination with the interplay between science and religion, Brown's works consistently feature historical architectural cities as a prominent theme. Through vivid descriptions and meticulous research, he brings cities like Rome, Paris, and Istanbul to life, using them as powerful backdrops to contrast their storied pasts with contemporary ideologies. These cities become integral characters in Brown's intricate plots, embodying the spirit of the past and reflecting the clash between ancient traditions and modern values.

Especially the description of Rome brings out the historical perspective of Langdon, who narrates "Rome . . . the caput mundi, where Caesar once ruled, where St. Peter was crucified. The cradle of modern civilisation. And at its core . . . a ticking bomb" (Brown, 2000, p.117). As characters navigate these urban landscapes, every street, building, and monument conceals hidden clues and enigmatic symbols, underscoring the cities' significance in unravelling mysteries and advancing the narrative.

Through intricate and evocative descriptions, Brown immerses readers in the atmospheres of the cities his characters explore. His meticulous attention to detail paints a vivid picture of each location, allowing readers to feel as if they were walking the labyrinthine streets of Rome. The sensory richness of his depictions captivates the readers, making the cities come alive in their minds. The following description of the statue of Bernini's sculptures: 'Habakkuk and the Angel' (1656–61), where earth ambigram was found is the perfect example of immersive description.

> ...At first he saw nothing. Then someone moved and he caught a glimpse. White marble. An arm. A torso. And then a sculpted face. Partially hidden in its niche. Two life-size human figures intertwined. Langdon's pulse accelerated. [...] As he drew near, Langdon recognized the work was pure Bernini- the intensity of the artistic composition, the intricate faces and flowing clothing, all from the purest white marble Vatican money could buy. It was not until he was almost directly in front of it that Langdon recognized the sculpture itself. He stared up at the two faces and gasped. (Brown 285)

Literature is intrinsically linked to spatial context, and often, authors select settings that mirror real-world locations. These settings are crafted with a level of realism that can serve as a guide to the depicted region or city. However, literature, by its very nature, possesses limitless possibilities in its treatment of space (Piatti et. al, 2009, p. 180). Rather than serving merely as backdrops, the cities in Brown's novels become integral to the unfolding plot. They are not passive settings but active participants, influencing character motivations and actions. The history and architecture of each city hold hidden clues and enigmatic symbols, propelling characters on thrilling journeys of discovery. The cities' pasts intertwine with the present, creating a sense of continuity and purpose that enhances the narrative's depth.

In the novel, the Pantheon is a Greek temple dating from around 125 AD and has the largest unreinforced concrete dome in the world. Built as a temple to pagan Roman gods, it was converted into a Roman Catholic church in the 7th century. Langdon comes to the Pantheon after mistakenly taking the building's 'oculus' (the opening in its roof), for the 'demon's hole' in one of the clues. Following the poem "From Santi's earthly tomb with demon's hole" (Brown, 2000), Langdon and Vittoria arrive at the church to find the tomb of Raphael Santi, the 16th-century Renaissance painter. Quickly they find that Raphael was not buried inside the Pantheon until the 17th century, after the Path of Illumination was created. However, Raphael designed an "earthly tomb" in the church of Santa Maria del Popolo, our previous stop. Understanding it too late, Langdon misses his chance to prevent the first murder.

> The air inside the Pantheon was cool and damp, heavy with history. The sprawling ceiling hovered overhead as though weightless-the 141-foot unsupported span larger even than the cupola at St. Peter's. As always, Langdon felt a chill as he

entered the cavernous room. It was a remarkable fusion of engineering and art. Above them the famous circular hole in the roof glowed with a narrow shaft of evening sun. The oculus, Langdon thought. The demon's hole. (Brown 240)

Brown infuses the cities with symbolic meaning, using their architectural structures to mirror the themes and mysteries explored in the story. Each city becomes a metaphorical representation of the struggle between past and present, tradition and modernity, science and religion. This symbolism enriches the reading experience, inviting readers to ponder deeper meanings and connections within the narrative. Piazza Navona is just a ten-minute walk from the Pantheon. One of Rome's most frequently-filmed squares, it was a sports arena during Ancient Roman times. Today, it is the backdrop for the stunning Fountain of the Four Rivers (Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi) by Bernini. A Baroque sculptural masterpiece, the fountain features four male figures representing the world's four greatest rivers known during the Baroque, one from each continent: America (Rio de la Plata), Africa (Nile), Asia (Ganges), and Europe (Danube). The figures support an Egyptian obelisk, topped by a bronze pigeon, a symbol of the peaceful work of Christ through his church in the world. Brown narrates the fountain through the character Langdon and the symbols are explored which allows the reader to delve more into the intrigue plot.

Another example comes in the ambigram at the end of the novel where the word 'rock' confused to find the bomb. Rock in Ambigram symbolise Peter who is called rock in the bible.

The camerlengo spoke quickly now. "The Illuminati have placed their tool of destruction on the very cornerstone of this church. At the foundation." He motioned down the stairs. "On the very rock upon which this church was built. And I know where that rock is." Langdon was certain the time had come to overpower the camerlengo and carry him off. …The stairway before them didn't lead to the foundation, it led to the necropolis! "The quote is a metaphor, Father! There is no actual rock!" The camerlengo looked strangely sad. "There is a rock, my son." He pointed into the hole. "Pietro è la pietra. Peter is the rock. (Brown 480)

Elements were symbolised as the church in the text in which the kidnapped Bishops were killed. To bring out the ideology of the Illuminati, the assassin killed each Bishop with the elements. The first element found in the novel is the earth.

Langdon did a double take. Earth. He had almost forgotten. The brands. Earth, Air, Fire, Water. The killer had threatened to brand each victim with one of the ancient elements of science. The first element was Earth. From Santi's earthly tomb. Dizzy from the fumes, Langdon circled to the front of the body. As he did, the symbologist within him loudly reasserted the artistic challenge of creating the mythical ambigram. Earth? How? And yet, an instant later, it was before him. Centuries of Illuminati legend whirled in his mind. (Brown 276)

Brown's meticulous research and attention to historical accuracy infuse his portrayals of cities with a sense of authenticity. The blending of historical facts and fictional elements seamlessly integrates the city's real-world significance with the fictional narrative, encouraging readers to explore the cultural and historical context beyond the novels. The great castration that happened in the year

1857 (Tracy, 2013) is brought out in the novel. When Langdon and Victoria walked toward the Swiss Guard office, they encountered a gauntlet of nude male sculptures. He thought of the history behind the change in the sculpture as follows:

> The Great Castration, Langdon thought. It was one of the most horrific tragedies in Renaissance art. In 1857, Pope Pius IX decided that the accurate representation of the male form might incite lust inside the Vatican. So he got a chisel and mallet and hacked off the genitalia of every single male statue inside Vatican City. He defaced works by Michelangelo, Bramante, and Bernini. Plaster fig leaves were used to patch the damage. Hundreds of sculptures had been emasculated. Langdon had often wondered if there was a huge crate of stone penises someplace. (Brown, 2000, p. 126)

Brown's portrayal of the city underscores the architectural significance of its structures, from renowned landmarks to hidden chambers and secret passages. Each architectural element serves as a narrative device that propels the story forward and keeps the reader enthralled. It highlights the delicate equilibrium between progress and the preservation of a city's unique identity, urging readers to reflect on the societal impact of urbanization and the importance of cherishing our cultural heritage. Dan Brown's expertise lies not only in crafting captivating narratives but also in using architecture and cities as essential components of his storytelling. His ability to blend historical facts with fictional elements creates a seamless integration of real-world significance and imaginative storytelling. Brown's cities are not passive settings; they are characters with their histories and secrets, adding depth and authenticity to the narrative. The careful attention to detail and historical accuracy encourages readers to explore beyond the novels, delving into the rich cultural and historical contexts woven into Brown's works. The intertwining of architecture and literature in Brown's novels not only enriches the reader's experience but also prompts contemplation of the intricate connections between physical spaces and storytelling.

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