

INTERTEXTUALITY AND SYMBOLISM IN ANGELS AND DEMONS BY DAN BROWN

Sadikova Dildora Nizomovna

Navoiy State university, The department of Practical English Course
sadikovadilya88@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article, we examine how these intertextual symbols are deployed in *Angels and Demons*. We analyze the roles of the classical elements as philosophical and ritual markers; explore the historical and organizational dimensions of the Illuminati as reimagined in the novel; and discuss how Brown's textual and visual strategies—fueled in part by the creation of ambigrams by artist John Langdon—contribute to a layered narrative that blurs the boundary between fact and fiction. The elements of air, water, earth, fire are main elements of the novel which can be discussed in intertextual category as allusion.

Key words

intertextuality, symbol, ambigram, illuminati, air, water, fire, earth

Introduction

Angels and Demons by Dan Brown is more than a fast-paced thriller—it is a complex text rich in intertextual symbolism that interweaves historical, cultural, and literary allusions into its narrative fabric. Central to the novel's thematic construction are two significant symbolic strands: the representation of the four classical elements (air, earth, fire, water) and the enigmatic imagery associated with the Illuminati council. These symbols, drawn from centuries of esoteric tradition and enhanced through modern reinterpretation, serve as narrative tools that both reflect and challenge the reader's understanding of science, religion, power, and secrecy.

2. Intertextual Symbolism: An Overview

Intertextuality in *Angels and Demons* is central to its narrative structure, functioning as a bridge between the historical record and modern conspiracy culture. Dan Brown's narrative is built on the premise that texts are never isolated; they reference and reshape meanings from a wide variety of cultural sources. This phenomenon—first theorized by Julia Kristeva—is evident in Brown's adept blending of history, art, and science.

The novel uses motifs and symbols derived from diverse traditions such as Masonic ritual, Rosicrucian lore, and ancient esoteric practices. Brown's text recontextualizes these elements, forging intertextual connections that not only enrich the plot but also invite readers to question the permeability of historical categories. Both the four classical elements and the imagery of the Illuminati council are employed as "palimpsests" where layered meanings can be discerned, ranging from philosophical meditations to secret ritual practices.

3. The Four Classical Elements in *Angels and Demons*



In *Angels and Demons*, the classical elements—air, earth, fire, and water—resonate far beyond their environmental significance. They are imbued with philosophical, ritual, and intertextual meanings that reflect the conflict between empirical science and ancient mystical traditions.

Air, as an element, is traditionally associated with intellect, communication, and the ephemeral nature of thought. In the context of the novel, air symbolizes the intangible yet pervasive force of knowledge and the transformative potential of Enlightenment ideals. The depiction of air in ambigram form—where its name can be read from multiple orientations—mirrors the concept that the dissemination of knowledge is fluid and multifaceted.

Earth represents stability, materiality, and tradition. It is often linked to ritual killings or historical markers in ancient esoteric practices. In *Angels and Demons*, earth is used as a tangible marker of the Illuminati’s past deeds, functioning as a historical record of ritualistic acts that guide the narrative’s dark undercurrents. The rigorous use of earth as a symbol—distinguished from the more abstract idea of “sand” often used in popular media—is rooted in its longstanding association with the physical world, grounding the fantastical elements of the novel in a realistic historical milieu.

Fire has long been a symbol of both destruction and purification. In the novel, fire is intertextually connected to themes of transformation and renewal. It represents the catalytic force of radical change as well as the destructive power exerted by secret societies intent on reshaping established structures in society. The imagery of fire is juxtaposed with elements of reason and empiricism, highlighting the paradox inherent in the pursuit of enlightenment through destructive means.

Water is a symbol of life, regeneration, and the unconscious mind. In *Angels and Demons*, water echoes the themes of rebirth and the cyclical nature of history. It is used by the Illuminati as a symbolic marker in their rituals, underscoring the fluidity of time and tradition. Water’s reflective quality also metaphorically represents the introspective examination of scientific and religious paradigms, urging the characters as well as the readers to look beneath the surface of established knowledge.

Visualization: Comparative Table of the Four Elements

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of the Four Classical Elements in Angels and Demons

Element	Associated Meanings	Role in <i>Angels & Demons</i>	Symbolic Representation
Air	Intellect, communication, transformation	Embodied through ambigrams symbolizing fluid knowledge exchange	Ambigram of “Air” that is readable from multiple orientations
Earth	Stability, physical tradition, historical markers	Serves as a tangible reminder of the Illuminati’s ritual actions and historical grounding	Earth serves as a marker for ritual killings and historical record



Fire	Destruction & purification, radical change	Represents both the force of transformative destruction and the potential for renewal	Depicted as a catalyst for change amidst chaos
Water	Life, regeneration, depth of the unconscious	Signifies the cyclic nature of history and introspection into scientific and religious conflicts	Revealed in rituals imbued with themes of rebirth and the cyclical journey of knowledge

4. The Illuminati Council: Historical and Fictional Dimensions

A major point of intertextual inquiry in *Angels and Demons* is the portrayal of the Illuminati. While the term “Illuminati” historically refers to a secret society that emerged in Bavaria, it is reimagined by Brown to serve as a multidimensional symbol of opposition to established religious power.

Historically, the Bavarian Illuminati was founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt—a professor of canon law at Ingolstadt—with the aim of promoting secular enlightenment and rational thought. The group, sometimes known as the “Bavarian Illuminati,” initially attracted members of the political and intellectual elite, including literary figures and nobility. Their esoteric rituals, elaborate use of ciphers, and secret hierarchical organization have fueled centuries of conspiracy theories, long after the society was suppressed by Bavarian authorities in 1785.

The historical narrative of the Illuminati is complex, involving a delicate interplay between Enlightenment ideals and the covert operations of a secret society. Brown—by revisiting this historical episode—crafts a narrative in which the remnants of the Illuminati’s intellectual aspirations are reinterpreted as part of a broader struggle against religious dogmatism.

Organizational Hierarchy and Symbolic Resonance

In *Angels and Demons*, the structure of the Illuminati is depicted through a meticulously layered system that mirrors historical models borrowed from Jesuit discipline and Masonic organization. The organization is conceptually divided into multiple classes:

1. **The Nursery** – The entry-level stage, where novices undergo initial training and are given their first symbolic names.
2. **Masonic Grades** – Borrowing from Freemasonic tradition, this stage includes the progression through ranks such as Apprentice, Fellow Craft, and Master.
3. **The Mysteries** – The upper echelon, further divided into Lesser and Greater Mysteries, symbolizing the profound, often esoteric knowledge that the upper levels guard.

Each of these levels is not only a command structure but also a vehicle for intertextual allusion. For instance, the use of classical pseudonyms (e.g., Weishaupt as “Spartacus”, Knigge as “Philo”) is an explicit nod to a tradition of naming that both conceals and reveals the true identities and roles of its members. The hierarchical complexity of the Illuminati structure is itself an erudite



reference to the labyrinthine traditions of secret societies—embodying the interplay of revelation and concealment central to the novel’s themes.

The fictional portrayal of the Illuminati in *Angels and Demons* weaves historical fact with imaginative conjecture. Brown’s narrative reintroduces the Illuminati as a secret brotherhood with a vendetta against the Catholic Church—casting them as persecuted intellectuals driven underground to pursue their radical scientific beliefs. This reimagining plays upon the longstanding cultural preoccupation with conspiracy theories surrounding secret societies.

Moreover, the integration of visual symbols such as the all-seeing eye, pentagrams, and ambigrams serves to deepen the narrative’s complexity. These symbols function as tangible signifiers of the dual nature of secrecy: while they obscure the true workings of the society, they also invite a closer scrutiny that promises hidden layers of meaning. Brown’s intertextual borrowing from Masonic and Rosicrucian traditions thereby creates a vivid symbolic tableau in which the historical Illuminati is reassembled as both a memory and a modern myth.

Intertextuality as a Narrative Mechanism in the Novel

Intertextuality in *Angels and Demons* provides much more than a decorative backdrop; it is central to the novel’s narrative strategy. By weaving together threads from disparate historical, religious, and cultural texts, Brown creates a narrative that is at once familiar and subversive.

The novel’s use of intertextual symbols involves the convergence of:

Historical Allusions: Brown references the foundation of the Bavarian Illuminati, the turbulent history of secret societies, and the ideological debates of the Enlightenment.

Religious Iconography: The narrative is replete with religious symbols—many of which are repurposed to critique institutional dogmatism and power.

Artistic Ambiguities: Through the use of ambigrams and carefully constructed visual cues, the text layers meanings that challenge the linear narrative of history.

This intertextual process is not passive: it requires an active engagement from the reader who must decode the multiple signifiers and reconcile the disparate layers of meaning. As a result, *Angels & Demons* becomes a site of intellectual palimpsest—where texts, symbols, and ideas continuously reinform each other, prompting a deeper inquiry into how cultural memory is constructed and contested.

6. Visual Symbolism and the Role of Ambigrams

The visual dimension of symbolism in *Angels & Demons* is inextricably linked to the work of John Langdon, a professor of typography whose ambigrams have become iconic in both the novel and its film adaptation. Ambigrams—words or designs that retain meaning when viewed from multiple orientations—serve as a literal manifestation of the novel’s central themes of duality and transformation.

The Creative Process and Purpose



Langdon’s ambigrams challenge the reader’s perception by defying traditional modes of reading. For example, the ambigram for “Illuminati” and the four elements are designed in such a way that they reveal different layers of meaning with each rotation. This design principle not only heightens the aesthetic appeal of the text, but it also mirrors the transformative journey of the characters who must navigate a labyrinth of hidden meanings and coded messages.

Moreover, ambigrams contribute to the intertextual narrative by symbolizing the inherent tensions between surface appearances and deeper truths. The operative ambiguity of these visual tools invites a level of engagement that transcends verbal expression, demanding that readers and viewers apply interpretive frameworks drawn from art, semiotics, and even mathematics.

The Interplay Between Text and Image

The visual interplay in *Angels & Demons* is a testament to the potency of multi-layered symbolism. When a symbol such as the ambigram is dynamically reoriented, it encapsulates the conflict of perception versus reality—a theme mirrored in the narrative’s broader exploration of scientific rationality versus mystical ideology. Thus, the ambigrams speak to the vitality of intertextuality: they are at once textual and visual, oscillating between fixed meaning and transformative possibility.

Visualization: Ambigram Design and Symbolic Function

An illustrative example can be seen in the following table that summarizes the design elements and symbolic functions of ambigrams used in the novel.

Table 2: Detailed Overview of Ambigram Symbols in Angels & Demons and Their Intertextual Functions.

Ambigram Symbol	Visual Characteristic	Symbolic Function	Intertextual Reference
Illuminati	Rotational symmetry	Dual nature of secrecy and enlightenment	Historical secret societies
Air	Multi-orientation readability	Fluidity of knowledge and thought	Classical element symbolism
Earth	Fixed, grounded imagery	Historical marker; ritual grounding	Esoteric ritual traditions
Fire	Dynamic, transforming visuals	Destruction and renewal	Symbol of change and purification
Water	Reflective, mutable design	Cyclic regeneration and introspection	Mythological and ritualistic allusions

7. Thematic Implications and Cultural Resonance

The intertextual symbols in *Angels and Demons* carry significant weight in terms of the novel’s thematic development. They are instrumental in framing the overarching conflict between science and religion and in challenging established paradigms of power and knowledge.



Science Versus Religion

One of the dominant themes in the narrative is the dichotomy between empirical science and institutional religion. The utilization of the classical elements and Illuminati symbolism serves to underscore this conflict. For instance, while the elements—air, earth, fire, and water—are rooted in ancient natural philosophy, their reconfiguration and representation as ambigrams symbolically align them with the modern pursuit of scientific understanding. Conversely, the narrative's portrayal of the Illuminati as a persecuted yet subversively powerful organization speaks to a history of intellectual rebellion against religious orthodoxy, particularly the institutional power of the Catholic Church.

The Power of Secrecy and the Allure of the Hidden

Secrecy is not merely a narrative device in *Angels and Demons*; it is the very essence of the story's atmosphere. The secretive nature of the Illuminati—reinforced by their complex hierarchical structure and coded communications—exemplifies the tension between what is seen and what remains hidden. The mystery of secret societies, steeped in ritual and historical ambiguity, invites the reader to question not only the veracity of the narrative but also the socio-political forces that thrive on obscurity and control.

Cultural Resonance and the Legacy of Conspiracy

Finally, the intertextual symbols in the novel resonate powerfully in contemporary culture. The conflation of historical facts with speculative fiction has fueled a vast body of conspiracy theories surrounding the Illuminati, transforming them into a cultural phenomenon. The enduring image of the all-seeing eye, the eye-in-the-pyramid, and other emblematic designs have seeped into everyday iconography—from currency designs to film posters—demonstrating the extent to which Brown's narrative taps into a collective cultural imagination. Such cultural penetration underscores the powerful function of intertextuality as a mechanism for reconsidering the past in light of present anxieties and aspirations.

8. Comparative Analysis: Historical Record vs. Fictional Representation

A critical aspect of understanding *Angels and Demons* lies in contrasting the historical record of the Illuminati with its fictional reinvention. While historical texts record the Illuminati as a short-lived yet intriguing attempt at fostering Enlightenment ideals in late 18th-century Bavaria, Brown's novel reimagines the society as a long-enduring secret brotherhood with apocalyptic ambitions.

Historical sources indicate that the Bavarian Illuminati was founded in 1776 by Adam Weishaupt as a vehicle for promoting reason, secularism, and mutual assistance among Europe's intellectual elite. The society's elaborate rituals, use of ciphers, and eventual suppression in 1785 form a factual basis that is both intriguing and mysterious. Despite its brief existence, the Illuminati left a lasting legacy in the realm of conspiracy theories, fueling imaginations for centuries after its disbandment.

Fictional Reinvention



In contrast, *Angels and Demons* employs a fictional narrative in which the Illuminati are portrayed as a timeless force—a secret council continuously active behind the scenes of global power struggles. Brown’s narrative transforms historical fragments into a cohesive myth where the Illuminati are both the progenitors and guardians of radical scientific thought. The use of intertextual symbols, such as ambigrams and ritualistic cues, further blurs the line between documented history and speculative fiction, enabling the novel to comment on contemporary cultural fears while drawing on deep historical roots.

Synthesis of Fact and Fiction

This synthesis of fact and fiction is emblematic of postmodern narrative strategies, in which the truth is seen as multifaceted and contingent upon perspective. Brown’s work exemplifies this by overlaying factual historical events with imaginative embellishments, prompting readers to negotiate their own interpretations of truth. The intertextual layering—the narrative’s reliance on historical texts, religious iconography, and esoteric symbolism—ensures that the novel remains both a tribute to and a subversion of historical reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dan Brown’s *Angels and Demons* exemplifies the power of intertextual symbolism to challenge conventional narratives by masterfully weaving together historical records, religious iconography, and modern cultural references into a rich tapestry of meaning. *Angels & Demons* stands as a compelling example of how intertextual symbolism can be harnessed to create narratives that are as intellectually stimulating as they are visually arresting. Through the intricate use of the four classical elements—air, earth, fire, and water—and the reimaged symbolism of the Illuminati council, Dan Brown challenges readers to interrogate the boundaries between fact and fiction, science and religion, history and myth.

Central to this is its use of the historical Bavarian Illuminati—founded by Adam Weishaupt in 1776 and suppressed in 1785—which provides a factual basis for much of the novel’s symbolism, transforming the secret society into a potent emblem of both enlightenment and conspiratorial power that resonates with contemporary anxieties. This intertextual layering is further enriched through the reinterpretation of the four classical elements, which function not as mere environmental descriptors but as profound ritual markers and symbols of the philosophical debate between science and religion, thereby adding significant narrative complexity. The strategy of blurring the lines between truth and fiction is visually crystallized in John Langdon’s critical ambigrams, which merge textual meaning with visual art to create a dynamic language of ambiguity, symbolizing the fluidity of knowledge and the hidden nature of secret societies. Ultimately, by employing these intertextual cues across historical, religious, and artistic domains, Brown bridges the gap between historical veracity and mythic speculation, creating a multi-layered work that continues to captivate audiences by inviting them to explore multiple, resonant dimensions of meaning.

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