

## Suspense in a Structuralist Reading of *The Da Vinci Code*

**Baneen Kadr Jasim**

Al-Muthanna University

DOI: 10.56201/ijelcs.v9.no3.2024.pg93.99

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### **Abstract**

*In Brown's novel, the use of suspense creates a sense of conflict and tension that drives the narrative forward. By examining specific scenes and passages, it is possible to see how and uncanny and binary opposition are used to create suspense and contribute to the novel's overall sense of mystery and intrigue. All of these elements work together to create a cohesive narrative that engages the reader and keeps them on edge until the very end. In conclusion, the use of suspenseful elements such as uncanny and binary oppositions creates a sense of tension and intrigue that keeps the reader engaged throughout the narrative. Applying a structuralist approach to analyzing these elements allows for a deeper understanding of how they contribute to the overall suspense of the novel. As I move on to the next section on ambiguity, I will continue to apply structuralist theory to uncover how the novel creates uncertainty and how this uncertainty contributes to its themes and message.*

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### **Introduction**

The previous chapter talked about structuralism theory. It discussed the basic structures that shape society and behavior. It used Todorov ideas to look at parts of the story like ambiguity and suspense. This chapter will shed light on how Brown's novel, *The Da Vinci Code*, uses structuralism to build suspense. *The Da Vinci Code* has a complicated story structure that keeps readers interested and tense throughout the plot. By looking at different writing styles, this chapter tries to help understand how structuralism has affected the growth of suspense. Finally, this chapter will end with a short summary of the important insights, highlighting how important it is to use structuralist methods when writing an interesting story.

### **Brown's Life and Works**

Dan Brown (1964) is an American novelist, born in Exeter, New Hampshire. He is known for using highly successful suspenseful writing. He was raised in an intellectually accomplished family. His father was an educator of mathematics, while his mother pursued a career in music. Brown's writing style is greatly influenced by his background, which often involves the fusion of cerebral enigmas, ciphers, artistic elements, and historical references in his writing. He enrolls at Phillips Exeter Academy, an esteemed preparatory school, where he cultivates a fervor for writing. Subsequently, he pursued English and Spanish studies at Amherst College and successfully obtained his degree in 1986. Upon finishing his schooling, Brown embarks on a career in the arts.

Brown published his first literary works, which include *187 Men to Avoid: A Guide for the Romantically Frustrated Woman* (1995) and *The Bald Book* (1998). In the field of comical

narrative, he did not achieve much recognition. Brown achieves a significant milestone in his career when he publishes his fourth book, *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). This book enthralled readers with suspense and mystery, using aspects of art, history, and religious symbolism to create a compelling narrative that captivated readers globally. Brown consistently produces further thrillers showcasing Robert Langdon, such as *Angels and Demons* (2000), *The Lost Symbol* (2009), *Inferno* (2013), and *Origin* (2017). Each of these novels has also enjoyed commercial success and attracted a large following of readers (Rogak 42).

Brown's writing style often includes short chapters that contribute to a fast-paced and suspenseful narrative. His novels have been translated into numerous languages and have collectively sold hundreds of millions of copies worldwide. Brown's works are renowned for their scrupulous investigation and the integration of historical and cultural allusions into gripping storylines. Although his works have achieved financial success, they have also encountered scrutiny due to their historical precision and contentious interpretations of religious motifs. Although Brown has faced criticism from some literary circles over the caliber of his writing and the veracity of his historical depictions, his talent for crafting captivating and engrossing narratives has propelled him to become one of the most accomplished and well-known writers of his generation. The successful adaptation of his writings into films has significantly broadened his worldwide following. Cox states that, in addition to Brown novels, he has also been involved in philanthropy and supports various charitable causes related to the promotion of literacy and arts (120).

The central plot of *The Da Vinci Code* is on a homicide that takes place in the renowned Louvre Museum in Paris, France. Jacques Saunière, the victim, serves as the curator of the museum and has membership in a clandestine organization called the Priory of Sion. Before he killed, Jacques Saunière carefully leaves a series of cryptic clues and symbols at the crime scene, which shows that he is hiding a very important secret. The main character, Robert Langdon, is called to the scene by the French cops to help interpret the symbols and figure out the puzzle. Langdon sets out to figure out the hints and find the hidden truth with the help of a cryptographer and Sophie Neveu, Saunière's granddaughter. As Langdon and Neveu look into the symbols and historical links, they become involved in a complicated web of plots involving the Catholic Church, hidden groups, and the supposed family tree of Jesus Christ. Different people have different ideas about Mary Magdalene, the Holy Grail, and the role of the holy feminine in sacred history. Throughout the book, the characters face many problems and dangerous enemies who are determined to keep the secret from them. Their search takes them to famous places in Europe, such as Paris, London, and the Rosslyn Chapel in Scotland. *The Da Vinci Code* received both acclaim and criticism. Readers praised its gripping plot, fast-paced narrative, and the thought-provoking integration of historical and religious elements. However, the novel faced backlash from some religious groups and scholars for its fictional portrayal of religious figures and institutions, as well as its exploration of controversial religious theories (Boa and Turner 46).

Despite the controversies, the novel's popularity soared, and it became a worldwide bestseller, selling millions of copies and being translated into numerous languages. It also led to a surge of interest in the historical and religious themes explored in the book. In 2006, *The Da Vinci*

*Code* adapts into a successful film directed by Ron Howard, starring Tom Hanks as Robert Langdon and Audrey Tautou as Sophie Neveu.

### **Nonlinearity and Narrative Structure**

Razzokovna states suspense is the intense feeling that an audience goes through while waiting for the outcome of certain events (168). It basically leaves the reader holding their breath and wanting more information. According to Todorov, suspense is created by delaying the resolution of a narrative conflict, leading to a sense of uncertainty and anticipation in the reader. In this regard nonlinear narrative could be a good device. Brown in *The Da Vinci Code* uses a nonlinear narrative structure as one of the most prominent aspects of his narrative style. This structure keeps the reader engaged and curious about what will happen next. He employs flashbacks and changes in perspective to present new information that builds on previous events. Brown writes, *Ten years ago*. Sophie had come home a few days early from graduate university in England and mistakenly witnessed her grandfather engaged in something Sophie was obviously not supposed to see. It was an image she barely could believe to this day (67). These lines describe a flashback from ten years ago when Sophie, a graduate student in England, returned home a few days early. During her early return, she accidentally witnessed her grandfather involved in something that he did not want her to see. The image she sees so shocking and unbelievable that it still remains vivid in her memory to this day. This quote creates suspense as the reader progresses through the passage, they are left with various unanswered questions. What exactly did Sophie see? Why was her grandfather engaged in something she should not have witnessed? How did this event impact her and her relationship with her family? These unanswered questions create a sense of suspense and anticipation in the reader's mind, compelling them to keep reading in search of answers.

Another flashback seen in the novel could be as his words had sent an unexpected surge of longing through her bones. My family! in that fleeting instant, Sophie saw images from the dream that had awoken her countless times when she was a little girl: My family is alive! They are coming home! but, as in her dream, the pictures evaporated into oblivion (Brown 68). The flashback takes Sophie back to her innocent and hopeful childhood, when she clung to the belief that her family was out there, waiting to be reunited with her. It had sustained her through the lonely nights and challenging days, becoming a beacon of solace in the darkness of her reality. Brown creates suspense by presenting evocative emotions, tantalizing revelations, and unanswered questions. The reader is drawn into Sophie's world, eagerly seeking answers and resolution to the mysteries surrounding her longing and the elusive dreams of her family. The stark contrast between hope and despair keeps the reader engaged, yearning to uncover the truth behind Sophie's emotions and her relentless pursuit of her family's return.

The past connection between Langdon and Jacques Saunière is another image of flashback in Brown's novel. This flashback raises intriguing questions about the significance of the key and its relevance to the murder investigation. The novel's gripping opening, featuring a murder and a cryptic message, immediately captivates readers and prompts them to question the identity of the murderer and the meaning behind the mysterious message. Brown writes, a telephone was ringing in the darkness...a tinny, unfamiliar ring. He fumbled for the bedside lamp and turned it on. Squinting at his surroundings he saw a plush Renaissance bedroom with Louis XVI furniture,

hand-frescoed walls, and a colossal mahogany four-poster bed (8). The eerie feeling of being out of place and time lingered, and Langdon's mind is filled with questions. The disjointedness between the historical elegance of the room and the contemporary intrusion of the ringing phone created a sense of anticipation and suspense. He knew that he is about to embark on a journey that would lead him to uncover secrets and untangle the enigmatic threads of the present, all while being haunted by the echoes of the past. Todorov's concept of suspense come together seamlessly in this scene. The disruption of the ringing telephone and the unfamiliar environment pique the reader's curiosity, while the detailed description of the opulent bedroom adds to the enigmatic ambiance. The reader is left with questions about the circumstances, creating a sense of tension and anticipation for what comes next. Todorov states that, The theme of this fantastic tale is the division of personality or doubling, and in a more general manner, the play of dream and reality, mind and matter (*The Fantastic* 121). Thus, the narrative technique of utilizing flashbacks as bridges between a protagonist's past and present holds the potential to provide a rich and multi-dimensional exploration of their psyche. Flashbacks, when strategically incorporated, can illuminate instances of the division of personality or the concept of doubling within a character.

### **Uncanny in Creating Suspense**

According to Todorov, one of the functions of fantastic is to create suspense. In a passage describing the functions of the fantastic Todorov writes:

First, the fantastic produces a particular effect on the reader — fear, or horror, or simply curiosity — which the other genres or literary forms cannot provoke. Second, the fantastic serves the narration, maintains suspense: the presence of fantastic elements permits a particularly dense organization of the plot. Third, the fantastic has what at first glance appears to be a tautological function: it permits the description of a fantastic universe, one that has no reality outside language; the description and what is described are not of a different nature (92).

Thus, the second function of the fantastic is to create suspense in plot. To do so, uncanny is a potent literary device for crafting suspenseful narratives. Its ability to transform the familiar into the unreal, create ambiguity and discomfort, and to subvert expectations all contribute to the generation of suspense.

In defining the uncanny, Todorov distinguishes between uncanny and marvelous. For Todorov, sense of the uncanny arises when the reader makes a decision that, the laws of reality remain intact and permit an explanation of the phenomena described (*The Fantastic*, 41). As readers navigate through the world of the uncanny, they are kept in a state of constant curiosity, seeking answers and anticipating the resolution of the mysterious and anxiety of the story. Todorov states that In the uncanny, we refer the inexplicable to known facts, to a previous experience and thereby to the past (42). Uncanny adds depth and complexity to storytelling, making it an indispensable tool for authors aiming to engage and captivate their audiences. Espen Aarseth writes:

In telling a story, one of the most successful devices for easily creating uncanny effects is to leave the reader in uncertainty whether a particular figure in the story is a human being or an automaton, and to do it in such a way that his attention is

not focused directly upon his uncertainty, so that he may not be led to go into the matter and clear it up immediately (217).

Thus, in the world of storytelling, the manipulation of confusion regarding a specific figure's nature is commonly used to create eerie effects. An effective tactic for creating mystery and anxiety is the practice of leaving the reader to question whether the character is human or a robot. Subtle execution is important to its effectiveness because it takes the reader's focus off of the ambiguity, which prevents them from seeking closure right away and lets the unsettling mood pervade the story. By not explicitly stating a character's motivations or traits, writers appeal to a basic human emotion: aversion to change. A cognitive discomfort that resonates with our fundamental aversion to uncertainty is prompted by the blurring of familiar categories at the border between humans and automatons. This ambiguity triggers an unsettling response in readers, encouraging them to delve deeper into the narrative in an attempt to decipher the true identity of the character. This engagement enhances the uncanny effect, as the uncertainty itself becomes a driving force that compels readers to continue reading in search of answers.

Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* utilizes uncanny to enrich the narrative and create suspense. He effectively generates suspense for the reader regarding the Holy Grail's true nature. By questioning the conventional understanding of the Grail as a physical cup, the narrative stimulates curiosity and anticipation, making the search for its deeper meaning a central element of the story. This literary technique keeps readers engaged and invested in the quest for knowledge and truth throughout the novel. Langdon says, The true nature of the Grail? Sophie felt even more lost now. The Holy Grail, she had thought, was the cup that Jesus drank from at the Last Supper and with which Joseph of Arimathea later caught His blood at the crucifixion. The Holy Grail is the Cup of Christ, she said. How much simpler could it be? (Brown 143). In this extract, Sophie's initial perception of the Holy Grail as a simple, physical cup is disrupted by Langdon's suggestion of a more mysterious and complex nature. This clash between the familiar and the strange generates an atmosphere characteristic of the uncanny. The ambiguity surrounding the true nature of the Grail blurs the line between reality and the supernatural, as Todorov says let us begin with the fantastic-uncanny. In this sub-genre events that seem supernatural throughout a story receive a rational explanation at its end. If these events have long led the character and the reader alike to believe in an intervention of the supernatural, it is because they have an unaccustomed character (*The Fantastic*, 44). In other words, Todorov's description of the fantastic-uncanny sub-genre elucidates its unique narrative structure, wherein events that initially appear supernatural are later explained rationally. The sub-genre's power lies in its ability to foster an atmosphere of ambiguity, drawing both characters and readers into a world where the boundaries of reality are questioned. This uncanny, leaving Sophie and the reader with a sense of suspense and uncomfortable.

Furthermore, Brown captivates readers with a thrilling sense of the unknown, blurring the boundaries between historical and strange to create an uncanny among readers. He writes:

Yes, but the brotherhood had another, more important duty as well—to protect the bloodline itself. Christ's lineage was in perpetual danger. The early Church feared that if the lineage were permitted to grow, the secret of Jesus and Magdalene would eventually surface and challenge the fundamental Catholic doctrine—that of a divine Messiah who did not consort with women or engage in sexual union (228).

The uncanny arises from something familiar, such as the historical figure of Jesus, with something strange and mysterious, the existence of a secret brotherhood devoted to preserving his lineage. This blending of historical reality with a hidden and enigmatic aspect introduces an unsettling feeling in readers in which they are confronted with an alternate interpretation of well-known religious figures, which challenges their established perceptions and beliefs, causing a sense of the uncanny as Todorov writes, events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason but which are, in one way or another, incredible; extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader reaction(*The Fantastic*, 46).

Thus, Todorov's insight into the fantastic genre underscores the power of storytelling to generate reactions in both characters and readers through the presentation of events that, while rationally accountable, possess extraordinary attributes. These attributes infuse narratives with emotional depth and intellectual intrigue, elevating the storytelling experience beyond the mundane. By weaving the extraordinary into the fabric of the familiar, authors invite readers to engage with characters' emotional journeys and explore the complexities of human response to the unexpected and remarkable. Similarly, the uncanny element is further intensified by the danger posed to Christ's bloodline. The perpetual danger implies an ongoing threat that spans generations, which heightens the sense of mystery and unease. Readers become curious about the nature of this danger and the lengths the brotherhood would go to protect the bloodline, drawing them deeper into the story. Todorov's structuralist interpretation of uncanny is present through the juxtaposition of familiar religious figures with mysterious elements, the perpetual danger surrounding the bloodline, and the potential revelation of hidden truths that challenge established beliefs.

Furthermore, Brown employs uncanny to reveal ancient taboos of hidden history of the Christian church. He uses these historical enigmas and conspiracies to create an atmosphere of suspense and uncertainty. The uncanny, combined with the fast-paced storytelling and clever plot twists, keep readers on suspense, eager to unravel the mysteries and secrets hidden within the narrative. By blending history, mystery, and conspiracy, Brown captivates readers and takes them on a thrilling journey that challenges traditional beliefs and provokes thought-provoking questions. Exactly. Assassinated by the Vatican in collusion with Pepin 'Heristal. Late seventh century. With Dagobert's murder, the Merovingian bloodline was almost exterminated (Brown, 229). The assassination of Dagobert and the potential involvement of the Vatican and other powerful figures reveal a narrative suggesting how the Christian church eliminated opponents and competitors during those times, resorting to any means necessary. This creates a sense of the uncanny for the reader, as it challenges traditional perceptions of religious institutions and raises questions about historical events that may have been concealed or distorted. The powerful entities could engage in secret plots and manipulation adds an element of intrigue and suspense, further enhancing the uncanny atmosphere of the story. Todorov writes the sentiment of the uncanny originate, then, in certain themes linked to more or less ancient taboos (*The Fantastic*, 48).

In other words, the sentiment of the uncanny often originates from themes linked to ancient taboos or deeply ingrained cultural beliefs. Generally, taboos are social or cultural restrictions on certain behaviors or subjects that are considered sacred, forbidden, or dangerous. When these taboos are explored or violated in literature or art, they can evoke feelings of discomfort and unease

in the audience, giving rise to the uncanny. In literature, the uncanny can manifest through various means, including symbolism, allegory, and metaphor. By drawing on ancient taboos, authors tap into a rich source of emotions and psychological triggers that resonate with readers on a primal level. For example, a taboo related to death and the afterlife might be explored through a haunted house in a story. The house becomes a symbol of the unknown, a place where the living and the dead intersect, evoking feelings of fear and fascination.

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