

DAN BROWN'S *THE LOST SYMBOL* AS A PARABLE OF MASONIC MYTHS AND MYSTERIES

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Abstract

Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol* reads like a holistic manifesto for a new, enlightened age. While going through the sacred texts, science, artwork, and music mentioned in it, we may enjoy creating our own apotheosis. Dan Brown talks about history, art, architecture, symbolism and secret societies that influenced the writing of the book and were directly mentioned in the book. As the world discovered in *The Da Vinci Code* and *Angels & Demons*, Dan Brown's novels are brilliant tapestries of veiled histories, arcane symbols, and enigmatic codes. *The Lost Symbol* again features the fictional, mystery-solving Harvard symbologist Robert Langdon. It is set in Washington D.C and the story takes place over a 12-hour period. This paper is an exploration of Freemasonry, a fraternal organization, its ritual and symbolism, and masonic mythology and how far the author incorporates fact and fiction in his most thrilling novel.

Key Words: Freemasonry, Myths and Mysteries, Lost Symbol, Apotheosis

INTRODUCTION

Dan Brown's *The Lost Symbol* can be considered as a parable. A parable is a story embellished with perhaps some grains of reality to convey a broader idea of truth. Dan Brown in his book *The Lost Symbol* has artfully woven an update of an ancient parable into a modern suspense novel that features prominently the one group that should be most apt to see the connection, the Freemasons. Freemasonry, a fraternity "veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols" (Brown, 57), is central to the plot's underpinnings, but by its end, merely the back drop by which the modern parable is played out.

Brown, at his finest, is a genius at writing parables. *The Da Vinci Code* is a prime example, the telling of the story of Christ, but not as a divine emanation of God, but rather a mortal man who walked on the earth like the rest of us. Brown's novels are a work of fiction, but artfully, he weaves in elements of reality and fact, so as to set his stage onto which the story unfolds, perhaps to give it a greater link into reality, or to simply paint enough real figures into the work so the less or unreal elements blend in to diffuse with the rest. The more believable the story, the more real it feels for the reader.

The Lost Symbol is the fifth novel by Dan Brown and it is the third story that features the recurring character of Professor Robert Langdon, the other two being *The Da Vinci Code* and

Angels and Demons. This novel is similar to the writer's previous mystery thrillers, which involve murder, historical significance, deadly secrets and a race against time. The novel is a great example of every popular mystery thriller that follows the conventions of structure for a storyline. The protagonist of the story, Robert Langdon, is a professor of religious symbology at Harvard University and the story deals with a secret of freemasonry that put the characters' lives in jeopardy. Prof. Langdon's expertise in the field of symbology has been helpful to him in previous life and death situations involving ancient conspiracies. The problem is that despite living a simple life as a professor in Massachusetts, he tends to find himself in dangerous situations that require his knowledge of ancient symbols to solve the problem.

The story begins with an inciting incident, when the protagonist is invited to give a lecture at the U.S Capitol Building in Washington D.C. Langdon is invited by Peter Solomon, the head of the Smithsonian Institution. Solomon is Langdon's former colleague and mentor. Robert Langdon is also asked to bring a package that Solomon entrusted to him years ago. The mentioning of the mysterious package is one of the first signs of mystery that is revealed in *The Lost Symbol*. But when he arrives at the Capitol Building he is surprised to learn that Peter Solomon did not invite him and there is no lecture. It turns out that Langdon was contacted by Solomon's mysterious kidnapper and he has left a disturbing object in the middle of the Capitol Rotunda for Robert to find: the severed hand of Peter Solomon, stuck to a wooden base and still bleeding. This creates a feeling of suspense and fear in the first half of the story.

Langdon eventually gets around to examining it and discovers a series of tattoos on the hand and fingers. He describes it as a real-life copy of "the Hand of the Mysteries, one of the most secretive icons of the ancient world". (Brown, 103) The thumb is tattooed with a crown, the index finger with a star, the middle finger with a sun, the ring finger with a lantern, and the little finger with a key. Langdon explains that the hand is a summons, "an invitation to receive secret knowledge, protected wisdom known only to an elite few." (Brown, 104) Robert is soon contacted by Peter's kidnapper who instructs him to find the Masonic Pyramid and the Lost Word within a certain time frame or he would kill Peter Solomon.

Dan Brown has said in interviews that one of his favourite research books is Manly P. Hall's *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*, and this seems to be the source of his description of the Hand of the Mysteries. Hall coyly ascribes his explanation of the Hand of the Mysteries to an unknown artist and author. In fact, the original source is the seventeenth century work, *The Hand of the Philosophers with Its Secret Signs*, by Johan Isaac Hollandus. Hollandus describes the hand as being filled with secret signs that only those who took the oaths of the alchemists would be able to understand. Each symbol is of an important substance used in practical alchemy's chemical processes.

Manly P. Hall tried to explain it in philosophical approach. The figure symbolizes the hand of a Master Mason with which he "raises" the martyred Builder of the Divine House. The 'key' represents the Mysteries themselves, without whose aid man cannot unlock the numerous chambers of his own being. The 'lantern' is human knowledge, for it is a spark of the Universal Fire captured in a man-made vessel and with the aid of which men seek to follow in the footsteps of Truth. The 'sun', the "light of the world", represents luminescence of creation through which man may learn the mystery of all creatures. The 'star' is the Universal Light, which reveals cosmic and celestial varieties. The 'crown' is Absolute Light—unknown and unrevealed—whose power shines through all the lesser lights that but sparks of this Eternal Effulgence. Thus is set forth the right hand, or active principle, of Deity, whose works are all contained within the "hollow of His hand."

The severed hand of Peter Solomon is left on the floor by the kidnapper as a symbolic representation of the Hand of Mysteries. The hand is a legend of freemasonry. Peter Solomon is kidnapped because he is a freemason. The Freemasons are an ancient brotherhood with a reputation for mystery and conspiracy. The theme of freemasonry is captivating to the readers because the brotherhood is filled with history that they find fascinating. The kidnapper has taken Peter Solomon and lured Prof. Langdon to Washington because they are both experts in freemasonry and close friends, so the kidnapper uses their friendship to coerce them into obeying his demands.

Freemasonry is the world's largest, oldest, and most well known fraternal organization. Masonry teaches lessons of social and moral virtues based on the symbolism of the tools and language of the ancient building trade, using the design and construction of a structure as a symbol for building character in men. Mythically descended from the builders of King Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, freemasonry is believed to have developed from the craft guilds of European stonemasons who built castles and cathedrals during the Middle Ages. Masons are obliged to practice brotherly love, mutual assistance, equality, secrecy, and trust among themselves.

From this point onwards we enter into a mysterious world of freemasonry-masonic myths and rituals. Robert Langdon along with the two authority figures, the head of Capitol police, Trent Anderson, and the CIA Director Inoue Sato, start their exploration based on the clues from the severed hand. The clues lead them down into the sub basement level of the Capitol building. They enter a room that has a Masonic altar. That is a secret room for American freemasons in Washington D.C. to gather and practice whatever rituals they participate in. There they find a miniature pyramid, which has a missing top capstone. The CIA Director Sato and Chief Anderson discover the missing pyramid capstone in Langdon's bag. The journey has taken unexpected turn when Director Sato mistakenly accuses Langdon for being involved with Peter Solomon's kidnapping. As Sato attempts to take Langdon into custody, the Capitol Architect Warren Bellamy attacks both her and Anderson. Robert decides to escape with Bellamy, as he is a good friend to Peter and also a freemason.

As the mystery thriller of *The Lost Symbol* continues, the identity of the mysterious kidnapper is revealed. He is known as Mala'kh, a steroid-bound mutant who has tattooed his whole body save for a spot on the top of his head with ancient symbols that have Masonic significance to him. There's not much known about Mala'kh other than he is a freemason who has taken upon himself to infiltrate the ancient brotherhood. His intentions are to gain a mysterious power that only high-level Masons are aware of. He has a tragic history with Peter Solomon and his family. He was involved with the sudden demise of Peter's son Zachary Solomon while he was held in a European prison, and also responsible for the tragic murder of Solomon's mother, Isabel. Now he has gone so far to kidnap and kill Peter unless he receives the 'knowledge' that Robert Langdon can provide him. Now we come across another character, Katherine Solomon, Peter's sister and Noetic Scientist. Katherine has become involuntarily thrust into the deadly search for Peter when Mala'kh attacks her at her laboratory. The man who has brought so much tragedy to the Solomon family has returned to bring more suffering to their lives in the pursuit of power.

Throughout the book, possession of the Masonic Pyramid is deeply sought after because it can lead the way to the Ancient Mysteries that can bring great wisdom to the one who understands them. Peter Solomon, Katherine and Robert Langdon seek the pyramid to keep the knowledge of the Ancient Mysteries safe. The antagonist, Mala'kh, seeks the pyramid so he can

find the Ancient Mysteries, which he believes is a certain symbol, the Lost Word, which he will etch on the top of his head in ink to transform himself into the perfect sacrifice so that he may become, essentially, a god. “This transformation of man into God is called *apotheosis*.” (Brown, 124)

Mala’kh is hunting for the ‘lost symbol’ and in the climax of the story Mala’kh takes Peter Solomon to the Masonic temple room of the Scottish Rites House of the Temple. Mala’kh reveals his sinister plan to release recorded videos of American politicians and government officials performing masonic rituals. At the same time, Mala’kh also reveals a terrible secret to Peter Solomon that will shatter his world. Mala’kh has revealed his true identity that he is Zachary Solomon, Peter’s long dead son! Mala’kh forces Peter Solomon to reveal the lost symbol that the freemasons have protected for centuries and Solomon lies to him that it is the ‘circumpunct’ (point within a circle). The point within a circle is one of the masonic symbols. The point in the center represents the Earth, which in medieval times was thought to be the center of the Universe. The heavens were believed to spin around the Earth, represented by the circle.

The story comes to an end with Zachary being killed in a rescue attempt made by Sato and Langdon. At the same time they prevent Zachary from releasing the controversial footage of freemasons all over the Internet. Unfortunately, it is at the cost of Peter Solomon losing his troubled son Zachary for a second time. The story winds out with a tragic dilemma, which brings to the idea that the story itself was a modern retelling of an ancient parable. The parable is from the Bible; Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son Isaac as a show of his allegiance to his faith in God. In that past parable, the test of faith is tremendous as the eldest born of Abraham is the greatest sacrifice that he can give, and he does give, willing at the command of God. In the climax of *The Lost Symbol*, the same test of faith is presented, but for a different outcome. Peter Solomon is in that Abrahamic position, and knowing what the consequences were for the sacrifice he was forced to make, he still chose to not make that sacrifice, choosing to follow his heart. Symbolically, the story was alluding from one of Abraham’s blind faith to man believing in the faith within us, that by our acts and intensions we were communing with the divine, which is a Gnostic outlook that sacrifice, in totality, is not necessary and in the end destructive. Here to sacrifice the son would still bring chaos, absolute destruction, personally and publically.

After the crisis has been averted, Peter decides to reveal the true Masonic Lost Word to Robert Langdon in secret. Solomon takes Robert atop the Washington Monument and tells him that the true cornerstone is the capstone atop the Washington Monument, which is the Masonic Pyramid. He also reveals the Lost word that is located on the cornerstone. The word is “*Laus Deo*”, meaning “Praise God.” (Brown, 649). The discovery of the mysterious word and the Masonic pyramid is similar to a literary device known as the McGuffin. It is a metaphor to describe anything in a story that possesses great importance or desire. The object that is coveted in the novel *The Lost Symbol* is The Lost Word. It is something that holds great importance to whoever is aware of its existence and to whoever realizes its true meaning.

Conclusion

Peter tells Langdon that the Masons believe that the Bible is an esoteric allegory written by humanity, and like most religious texts around the globe, it contains veiled instructions for harnessing humanity’s natural God-like qualities and is not meant to be interpreted as the commands of an all powerful deity. This interpretation has been lost amid centuries of scientific

skepticism and fundamental zealotry. The masons have (metaphorically) buried it, believing that, when the time is right, its rediscovery will usher in a new era of human enlightenment.

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