

# First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition

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Volume 2019

Article 7

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Spring 2019

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### Recommended Citation

Howell, M. (2019). The Feminist Question: A Close Look at Feminism in Dan Brown's The Da Vinci Code. *First Class: A Journal of First-Year Composition*, 2019 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/first-class/vol2019/iss1/7>

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# Honors Program Second Prize Essay

## THE FEMINIST QUESTION: A CLOSE LOOK AT FEMINISM IN DAN BROWN'S *THE DA VINCI CODE*

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Dan Brown's critically acclaimed best-selling book-turned-movie is an exciting mystery that follows symbologist Robert Langdon in the quest for the Holy Grail. Almost immediately, Langdon finds himself in trouble and is rescued by the beautiful, intelligent Sophie Neveu, and the two of them find themselves on a race to find the Holy Grail before the murderer of Sophie's grandfather does. Brown's Holy Grail, however, is not the usual image brought to mind, and instead it is the proof that Mary Magdalene was Jesus's wife, bore his child, and created a line of descendants that humanized Jesus rather than deifying him. The quest that Sophie and Robert find themselves on is marked by art and symbology of the sacred feminine and ties in the history of goddess worship. Sophie finds that her recently murdered grandfather was involved in a secret group that protected the secret of Mary Magdalene and celebrated the sacred feminine and the wholeness created in the union between men and women. Throughout the tale, Sophie proves herself to be key in solving the puzzle leading to the Holy Grail, in addition to the multitude of male experts on the subject, and gratuitously falls in love with Langdon by the end of the novel. I argue that Dan Brown illustrates the importance of women and femininity through his presentation of the sacred feminine and female protagonist, Sophie Neveu, as having critical importance to his exploration of the infamous quest for the Holy Grail. Ultimately, Brown suggests that balance in the male-female dichotomy is critical but also falls short of lofty feminist interpretations with a deeper analysis of goddess worship and Sophie Neveu demonstrating a reinforcement of gender roles.

Upon its release, *the Da Vinci Code* received a variety of reactions, ranging from love to hate, for reasons from feminism to sacrilege. Dan Brown's twisting trail that follows Sophie and Robert as they race to find the Holy Grail highlights the importance of women and elevates feminine sanctity. Due to the nature of Brown's Holy Grail and various secret societies, the novel has been touted as a great feminist work; however, many critics rightly disagree. While Brown works to uplift women and address the systematic oppression of women and their union with men, his writing remains trapped in internalized gender roles so that "the novel undercuts its feminist moves through its persistent recourse to the private sphere and its unremitting celebration of the biological. The narrative falls victim to the problem that commonly inheres in difference/ cultural feminism: it reifies the binary system of gender" (Maddux 225). By reinforcing the binary gender system, Brown also reinforces the traditional gender roles while simultaneously regulating ideas of female liberation to the privacy found behind closed doors, or rather in hidden underground bunkers. To add to Brown's struggle to create a feminist novel, he is forced to contend with historical women being sustained to "support ideological paradigms and subvert alternative interpretations... Despite Brown's intention to remember Magdalene in a new way, his contribution to public memory re-inscribes a gendered view that truncates her agency as a woman and leader in early Christianity" (Kennedy 120). History is written by the victors—a concept often mentioned by Brown to explain the erasure of Magdalene's importance—and historically, men have been the dominating power, minimizing women's power and impact through gender roles that regulate women to beauty and sweetness. Even as

Brown writes in appreciation of women and elevates their importance far beyond what is normally seen in history or literature, he still rewrites Mary Magdalene into yet another role that diminishes the impact she had.

Brown is heavily criticized for his novel due to its representation and idealization of goddess worship and the belief in the sacred feminine as he uses the goddess cult to rationalize and support the balance created in a male-female dichotomy. Addressing the sacredness of femininity adds to the wild popularity of the novel as one critic claims “This core motif of our missing maternal ground has touched people subliminally... and activates our hungry desire to reconnect with a sense of the soul and its capacity for the numinous feminine” (Giannini 65). Within today’s society the domination of men over women perpetuated by the Church has only continued so seemingly Brown’s commercial success in part can be credited to the lack of balance and femininity in modern society. The implication being that the sacred feminine fascinates people. As Langdon and Sophie follow the trail left by Sophie’s grandfather, Brown leads readers through an alternate view of history in which Mary Magdalene is Jesus’s wife and had His child after he was crucified. This alternate history of goddess worship and sacred union of men and women is a fascinating combination of feminism and ingrained gender roles.

Brown addresses the historical and religious basis for his fictional account of the Holy Grail quest by often decrying the oppression and erasure of women and female sanctity by the Church, adding to his feminist appeal. Historically, the Church has forced women out of the influence by deeming them weaker and over time “women became the more psychologically vulnerable sex, never to be trusted with matters of doctrine” (Bendroth 3). In modern times, however, women have begun to push back against the patriarchal tide. Studies have found that some women have been able to find a balance between their faith and feminism: “many of these participants have previously considered abandoning their faith, which suggests it is possible they may experience an interest in leaving the Church again in the future” (Pauly 43). The research demonstrates both past and present-day inability of Christianity to fully accept women as independent agents so that their strength and validity as women remains repressed. Brown notes the “belief that powerful men in the early Christian church ‘conned’ the world by propagating lies that devalued the female and tipped the scales in favor of the masculine... demoniz[ing] the sacred feminine, obliterating the goddess from modern religion” (Brown 124). Here, Brown illustrates fall of femininity from grace. He repeats how men ruined the sacred feminine and forced women far from equality in multiple ways, reinforcing both the idea that women were originally equal to men and that men caused this shift. Brown uses words with heavily negative connotations to convey the wrongness of this shift. Furthermore, Brown, through Langdon, asserts that “The power of the female and her ability to produce life was once very sacred, but it posed a threat to the rise of the predominantly male Church, and so the sacred feminine was demonized and called unclean” (238). This is a driving premise of the novel: man rewrote history to erase and demonize women and femininity. Brown connects religious treatment of women as inferior to the need of the Church for control over the people, again using strong adjectives to describe how the sacred feminine has been corrupted. He uses the conflict between women and the Church to exemplify one of the largest aggressors against women in history by embellishing a narrative of oppression of the sacred feminine. This oppression is epitomized by the historical rewriting of Mary Magdalene that minimizes her importance and strength.

Brown highlights the importance and power of women through Mary Magdalene as the Holy Grail, however even this radical theory falls short of feminism due to Magdalene’s importance being derived from her marriage to Jesus and the child she bore. While women can be important as wives and mothers, issue arises when their importance is derivative of their husbands’. As Brown tries “empowering her as a wife and mother... to remedy the stigma associated with her reputation as a prostitute, his contribution to public memory re-inscribes a traditional and explicitly heteronormative view of gender that trun-

cates her agency as a woman and leader in early Christianity” (Kennedy 123). Critical analysis of *The Da Vinci Code* demonstrates a failure to break from traditional gender roles within literature, reinforcing the loss of female sanctity. Brown elevates the importance of women through Magdalene by claiming “The Church needed to defame Mary Magdalene in order to cover up her dangerous secret—her role as the Holy Grail” (Brown 244). Magdalene’s importance is introduced dramatically, meant to shock the readers. Brown intentionally waits for the first half of the book to build the sacristy of the feminine and goddess worship before he finally reveals what the Holy Grail is. It is clear where the feminist title came from when Magdalene’s importance is introduced, adding to the elevation of femininity. With a closer look at Magdalene, however, it becomes clear that her importance is drawn from Jesus rather than from her own faculty: “Magdalene was recast as a whore to erase evidence... the greatest cover-up in human history. Not only was Jesus Christ married, but He was a father” (248). Mary’s existence as wife to Jesus and mother of His child threatens the ground upon which Christianity was built, hence the public memory is altered to overwrite female importance. The union between Jesus and Mary resulting in a child is demonstrative of the supernatural wholeness that Brown emphasizes between men and women throughout the text in his recurring mentions of the goddess cult. Unfortunately, Magdalene’s importance is often reduced to her child-bearing faculty: “Mary Magdalene was the Holy Vessel. She was the chalice that bore the royal bloodline of Jesus Christ. She was the womb that bore the lineage, and the vine from which the sacred fruit sprang forth” (248). Mary is reduced, quite often, to the role of womb. So, despite Mary’s newfound importance to the religious narrative of the tale, she still derives her importance from Jesus and the feminine duties of being a wife and motherhood which only reinforces—rather than challenges—the traditional roles assigned to women. Brown’s choice to designate her importance to gender-typical maternity negates his elevation of women throughout the novel.

Sophie Neveu illustrates a strong female protagonist as Brown seeks to build a nontraditional role for his lead female character, nonetheless Brown continues to fall short of elevating femininity. Literature has often been influenced by the readers and in a world of growing female literacy, the lack of female characters with depth has become more pronounced. Previous studies have addressed the increasing percentage of female protagonists and decreasing depictions of traditional gender roles; however, many of the novels still reinforce gender roles even with strong female characters because their strengths often isolate them from their peers.<sup>1</sup> Even as feminism leaves its mark and female protagonists begin to dominate the literary field as much as male protagonists, authors struggle to deviate from the institutionalized gender roles. Brown’s protagonist, Sophie Neveu, is created in a nontraditional role that on the surface would earn Brown a feminist title, however deeper analysis of female characters reveals that Brown is not quite able to break from literary gender roles. Sophie is an intelligent and driven woman: “At the age of twelve, Sophie could finish the *Le Monde* crossword without any help, and her grandfather graduated her to crosswords in English, mathematical puzzles, and substitution ciphers. Sophie devoured them all. Eventually she turned her passion into a profession by becoming a code breaker for the Judicial Police” (Brown 77). Sophie is a very intellectual from a young age, completing tasks that many adults struggle with, as Brown intends for her to be a strong character that can help drive the plot forward. She takes her talents to turns them into a job in a field usually reserved for men—police work. Sophie does not wait for anyone to save her, as is typical of women in literary works, instead she is often the one doing the saving when it comes to her partner, Robert Langdon. Not long after meeting Sophie, “Langdon resolved to not say another word all evening. Sophie Neveu was clearly a hell of a lot smarter than her was” (87). Sophie’s calm intelligence is usually reserved for the suave male protagonist who rescues a damsel in distress, however Brown reverses these roles to elevate the role of women and emphasize their importance. Langdon somewhat

<sup>1</sup>McCleary, Melissa A., and Michael M. Widdersheim. “The Princess and the Poor Self-Image.” *Pennsylvania Libraries: Research & Practice*, vol. 2, no. 1, Spring 2014, pp. 6–26. EBSCOhost, doi:10.5195/palrap.2014.55.

humorously notes that Sophie is a lot more capable than he is in this situation and defers to her expertise to get the two of them to safety. However, there is a distinct lack of other female characters while there is an abundance of male major characters. Despite Brown's creation of a strong, nontraditional female character, he fails to create more than one major female protagonist. Instead all major characters other than Sophie are men. This highlights the deeper habits of literature that preference male characters over female due to the traditionally passive role of women within a text. Although Brown writes Sophie as a strong woman, the lack of other women for her to interact with disrupts the feminism of *The Da Vinci Code*.

While Sophie Neveu presents an impressive female protagonist, Brown's characterization of her lacks the depth that would be expected of a feminist novel; from her physical attributes to her royal blood to her romance with Langdon as her paired protagonist, Sophie Neveu falls short of a feminist writing. Girls grow up with fairy tales idolizing the passive princesses that marry a prince to live happily ever after; this idolization is internalized and makes itself known in adulthood through the traits women have, the friendships they form, and the romantic relationships they build.<sup>2</sup> The influence of childhood on adulthood is well-known, however the internalization of gender roles illuminates some of the shortcomings of Sophie Neveu as a feminist character. Of course, after a few very intense days Sophie and Robert obligatorily form an intimate relationship: "Sophie leaned forward and kissed him again, now on the lips. Their bodies came together, softly at first, and then completely. When she pulled away, her eyes were full of promise" (Brown 449). The romantic subplot is only heightened by the Holy Grail hunt that highlights the unity between man and woman, and Brown illustrates this romance with an idealized softness. Even as he elevates women and femininity in his novel, Brown falls victim to the ever-popular love subplot. Furthermore, Sophie is created to be attractive, like all female protagonists, however she is also different from typical beauty according to Langdon as the male protagonist: "Her thick burgundy hair fell unstyled to her shoulders, framing the warmth of her face. Unlike the waifish, cookie-cutter blondes that adorned Harvard dorm room walls, this woman was healthy with an unembellished beauty and genuineness that radiated a striking personal confidence" (50). The importance of Sophie cannot be understated, as she is glowing when she first meets Langdon. Brown creates Sophie as an idealistic model of femininity, effortless and warm, yet very importantly different from other girls. This harkens back to the warmth that women are expected to demonstrate while also setting her apart from other women—in looks and skill. Her difference is supposed to add to her beauty, but rather adds to the toxic not-like-other-girls complex that has been growing in modern literature. Sophie is literally a hidden princess, like every little girl's dream, further adding to the gender role expectation. Sophie's late parents were "direct descendants of Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ... [and] their children represented the most direct surviving royal bloodline" (442). In their quest for the Holy Grail, Brown ensured that the female protagonist was even further elevated as a spotlight case to emphasize the importance of women. The role of princess, however, detracts as much as it adds to Sophie's character. While it elevates her implicit importance even more so, it also boxes her into a more typical female role of beauty and royalty. The underlying gender roles that are reinforced by Sophie add to the romanization of any male and female protagonists questing together, especially as the woman becomes a key aspect of that quest or the end of it.

Brown's impressive sell on the goddess cult elevates and highlights the importance of femininity and balance, and in doing so Brown also reinforces a male-female dichotomy and the corresponding gender roles. Gender roles are learned and internalized at a very young age to determine how children act as they grow into adulthood, affecting the relationships they build and the way they communicate, and these gender roles tend to lead to sexism.<sup>3</sup> Often, the internalization of gender roles shows itself in unexpected

<sup>2</sup>Maass, Vera Sonja, *The Cinderella Test*. Praeger, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>Swann, William B., et al. *Sexism and stereotypes in modern society: the gender science of Janet Taylor Spence*. American Psychological Association, 1999.



and uncontrollable ways in literature. Additionally, the relations between men and women in *the Da Vinci Code* are “persistent [in] recourse to the private, specifically its reduction of women to biology alone, ultimately undercuts its feminist potential and reinforces the status quo” (Maddux 241). Brown’s attempts to equalize male and female tend to fall short. He explains goddess worship as inspiring equilibrium in all things: “When male and female were balanced, there was harmony in the world. When they were unbalanced, there was chaos” (Brown 36). The dichotomy of men and women is emphasized from the very start of the novel. Together they create balance, apart they fall in disarray. Brown’s word choice emphasizes the expected peace found in equality of men and women while also accentuating the importance of the diametric balance repeatedly. Addressing the corruption of the goddess cult Brown writes, “Women, once celebrated as an essential half of spiritual enlightenment, had been banished from the temples of the world... the natural sexual union between man and woman through which each became spiritually whole—had been recast as a shameful act” (125). It is important here that sexual union is connected to shame, despite ancient freedom with it. Brown tries to go against the religious morals regarding women and male-female union by retrieving sex from the dirt it was put in when Christianity dominated. Sophie broke her relationship with her grandfather over the contrived shame to be found in sex, which serves to highlight Brown’s critique of the demonization of the union between men and women. Despite Brown’s lofty language surrounding the sacredness of gender balance, he often reduces the so recently elevated Mary Magdalene to the container that gave life to the child of Jesus: “And Mary Magdalene was the womb that carried His royal lineage” (255). More so than a human being, Mary Magdalene is simply the womb, a fact that seems it should be opposed to the goddess worship that is ever-present in this novel. It is not, however, because despite Brown’s efforts to elevate his work beyond the patriarchal sex-shaming and women-hating, he cannot escape the internalized gender roles formed by centuries of female oppression. Brown tries to create a feminist novel that respects and elevates women as historically repressed, but he falls into the trap of objectifying women, even the goddess—Mary Magdalene.

Dan Brown addresses the systematic oppression of women with an intention of elevating the historic and contemporary importance of women. At a surface level, he is successful, however the implications made by his writing reduces women to the gender-typical role of beautiful, passive wife and mother. As the contemporary paradigm shifts, many authors struggle with similar issues of elevating their female characters but still falling victim to the unconsciously internalized gender roles. Female authors are no exception to this. The efforts to enter strong female characters into literature, however, evolves with every author as certain kinds of characters gain more commercial success and popularity than other. Brown’s beautiful but different-from-other-girls female protagonist is one of the most popular kinds of female characters, but a new wave of characters has been growing more recently, learning from the dialogue created over characters like Sophie Neveu.

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