

The Symbols Of “Earth and Air” From Angels and Devils by Dan Braun

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Abstract: This article explores the symbolic representations of the elements air and earth in the context of angels and devils, with a particular focus on their depiction in Dan Brown's novel "Angels and Demons." Through a semiotic analysis, the study identifies and interprets the key symbols associated with air and earth, such as the Chapel Chigi (Earth) and West Ponente (Air), as well as their broader metaphysical and narrative significance. In the novel, earth is consistently linked to power and stability, while air symbolizes intelligence and divine inspiration. These elements are not only central to the plot's progression—guiding protagonist Robert Langdon through a series of symbolic markers—but also reflect deeper philosophical and spiritual associations found in various esoteric and religious traditions, where earth denotes steadfastness and air represents the subtlety of spirit or intellect.

Keywords: Symbols, Angels and Demons, ambigram, air, earth.

Introduction: In literature, symbolism is a method that highlights how crucial evocation and suggestions are to expressing one's innermost feelings or thoughts. It contains symbols—words, locations, people, or things that have meanings beyond what is on are employed to create subtle relationships and affinities, particularly between the material and spiritual realms as well as between sound, sense, and color, on a literal level. The idea of a symbol is ambiguous. A symbol is a term, location, person, or thing that has a meaning beyond its literal meaning. Despite being interesting in and of itself, a symbol represents or alludes to something larger, more profound, loftier, and more intricate concept or collection of concepts, dispositions, and behaviors. The idea of a symbolic-semiotic model draws attention to the aspects of the text structure that are changing and, in some ways, remain constant, and it turns the work into an analysis and the overall focus of the study at every level. In addition to this ambiguity, symbols also produce mystery through ambiguous meanings and cognitive dissonance when they are purposefully used in the same context yet have opposing or conflicting interpretations. Mystery breeds curiosity, and the search for hidden meanings

develops mystery.

Symbolism is a unique literary phenomena that particularly refers to the writings of authors from the late nineteenth century who rebelled against naturalism's scientific determinism, realism's descriptive accuracy, and realism's objectivity. Symbolism was primarily a Paris-based literary movement in France, with French authors Arthur Rimbaud, Paul Verlaine, and Stéphane Mallarmé among its key figures.[1] The idea that the goal of the arts is to depict the world as it is seen by the senses was rejected by symbolists. They contend that concepts, as opposed to sensory or objective description, are something that are present in all works of art. The way our minds function may be the reason for the universal human interest in the usage of symbols. “Most of our normal conceptual system is metaphorically structured; that is, most concepts are partially understood in terms of other concepts,” according to George Lakoff and Mark Johnson.[2]

In addition to disclosing meaning, symbols can also imply and hide meaning. They are therefore an intriguing way to arouse curiosity and reveal notions and hidden realities. The hidden meanings are

revealed when the symbols are closely examined in their totality. In Langdon's *Angels and Demons*, symbology is the study of the meanings of symbolic hints taken from historical and religious works of art.

METHOD

Dan Brown's *Angels and Demons* (2000) is replete with symbols; the author interweaves religious and historical allusions throughout the narrative. The Illuminati, a covert group that attempted to bring religion and science together, has infiltrated the Vatican with the goal of exacting revenge. The goal of this research project is to examine the symbols and symbolism that the novel's protagonist, Professor Robert Langdon, a religious and historical symbologist, presents in the book.

A communication from the director of CERN, a European facility for particle research, wakes up Professor Langdon early in the morning at the start of the book. Maximilian Kohler is the director.

An ambigram is the mark of an old cult known as the Illuminati, which Robert immediately recognizes as the representation of the emblem. It is used to describe those who assert that they have illumination that has been directly conveyed from a higher power or as a result of a wealth of human knowledge. According to historical accounts, the Illuminati was a group of brilliant thinkers during the Renaissance, including the renowned scientist Galileo, who ruled his time with his science papers and discoveries, and the artist Bernini. Fearing that their scientific ideas would have an impact on Christian theology, the Vatican tracked for and removed the society's members from Rome. Such a community was established about a century later, according to historians in 1776 in Bavaria.

Within an hour and a half, Kohler phones Langdon to ask for his assistance. Robert first expresses reluctance to offer his assistance, but ultimately consents. He then lands at CERN following a Mach 15 flight in the Boeing X-33 prototype.

At last, he encounters Maximilian Kohler. He travels to CERN after being led to Leonardo Vetra's personal laboratory, the scene of the crime.[3]

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

The symbol of Air. In Dan Brown's novel *Angels & Demons*, the Air symbol is one of the four elemental markers used by the Illuminati in the ritualistic killings of Catholic cardinals. Emphasizing the novel's concept of dualism and hidden meanings, the Air symbol is crafted as an elegant ambigram—a design that reads the same when inverted. The second cardinal, Lamassé, is murdered under the sign of "Air". Langdon and the police find him on the brink of death in St. Peter's

Square. He struggles to breathe before succumbing, with the ambigram of "Air" marked on his chest. This scene not only advances the plot but also underscores the contrast between air—symbolizing breath, life, and spirit—and its suffocation, representing death.

The element of Air symbolizes intellect, spirit, and the invisible force that drives our planet. Its use in the murder reflects the Illuminati's weaponization of natural elements as tools of vengeance against the Church. St. Peter's Square, located within Vatican City, serves as the second "altar of science", dedicated to the element of Air. This square is one of the most renowned works of the Italian sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini, rich in ancient and symbolic meanings, embodying both religious and scientific ideas.

The second marker on the "Path of Illumination" is a circular stone slab inscribed with West Ponente. It features an angel representing the blowing wind. West Ponente translates to "west wind," and the angel's breath—the direction of the air—guides the way to the third "scientific altar." This is part of an ancient symbolic system where each element (earth, air, fire, water) is represented through distinct markers and locations.

On the path of enlightenment, Langdon and the reader are directed toward the next location in the Illuminati's deadly sequence using this symbol. Visually striking and memorable, the Air ambigram features a symmetrical, open design incorporating both straight and curved lines. This graphic design embodies the novel's central theme—the blurred boundary between science and religion, as well as the duality of good and evil.

A hypertextual analysis of the symbol draws connections to William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the element of air (atmosphere) deepens the philosophical and psychological themes of the play. Particularly in the "To be, or not to be" soliloquy, this symbol holds significant weight. The atmospheric air in the monologue represents the stark contrasts between life and death, action and inaction, reason and madness. The words "To be, or not to be" not only pose an existential question but also reflect the environment's impact on the protagonist. Shakespeare uses air not just as a natural phenomenon but as a powerful symbol of the characters' inner conflicts and contradictions. In ancient myths and teachings, the Air symbol carries diverse meanings, making its interpretation in various works complex.

Hypo-Hypertextual Analysis of the Earth Symbol

In Dan Brown's *Angels & Demons*, the four elements play a central role, unfolding in an organic sequence throughout the novel. "Earth" is depicted as one of the four fundamental elements (fire, air, water, earth),

each critically shaping the narrative through murders and cryptic symbols. The sacred "Earth" symbol in the novel is represented by soil, as earth can be artistically and literarily expressed in various forms—sand, mountains, earthquakes, and even the green hues of trees and plants—each embodying significant aspects. However, every symbol carries eclectic meanings, applied differently depending on context.

The first "Altar of Science" is located in the Chigi Chapel (Capella della Terra or "Chapel of Earth") within the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo, presented as the symbol of the Earth element. It is here that the first cardinal (Cardinal Ebner) is found murdered, his mouth stuffed with soil, suffocated, and marked with the ambigram of "Earth."

In our analysis, the concept of "earth" manifests not merely as a physical element but also as the foundation of humanity, a symbol of stability, and the complex interplay between life and death. The idea of being buried in soil signifies the cycle of human return to the earth ("from dust to dust"), reflecting both the cyclical nature of existence and the finality of human life.

From a hypo-hypertextual theoretical perspective, analyzing the "earth" symbol deepens its meaning in the novel: earth is not just a natural element but a multifaceted concept encompassing cultural, social, and metaphysical layers. Through this symbol, the author explores humanity's intricate relationship with its environment, traditions, and the modern world, while also reflecting how different cultures, mythologies, and philosophical systems interpret the concept of "earth."

Ultimately, the "Earth" symbol becomes one of the novel's central motifs, probing humanity's eternal questions—life, death, meaning, and legacy.

The "Earth" symbol encompasses multiple layers of significance. In its denotative sense, it is understood as physical "soil" or the planet itself. Connotatively, however, it evokes ideas of fertility, origin, stability, and the material foundation of existence. From a semiotic perspective, the "earth" symbol is a product of social convention and cultural tradition—its meaning is not derived from a natural or iconic connection but is instead arbitrarily assigned within a given context.

Hypotextual Roots of the Earth Symbol.

In the framework of hypotextuality, the historical roots of the "earth" symbol trace back to ancient Egyptian and Asian civilizations, making it possible to trace its presence in texts and cultural narratives from millennia ago. "Earth" or "soil" is among the oldest types of symbols, appearing as allegories, personifications, or deifications—most commonly in the form of the "Earth

Goddess" (or, in Egyptian mythology, the god Geb).[5] Before the Hellenistic period established the Earth's spherical shape, its primary characteristic was perceived as a flat plane. In Egyptian hieroglyphs, the word for "earth" or "soil" was depicted as a flat stretch of land with grains of sand. In Sumerian cuneiform, the sign KI (𒀭), meaning "earth" or "place," originated from the depiction of a threshing floor. Meanwhile, the Chinese character for "earth" (土) evolved from the image of a lump of clay on a potter's wheel.[6]

CONCLUSION

The article concludes that the interplay of these elemental symbols is integral to the narrative structure and thematic depth of "Angels and Demons," demonstrating how ancient cosmological concepts continue to shape modern storytelling and the portrayal of the eternal conflict between good (angels) and evil (devils). The exploration of air and earth symbols in the context of angels and devils reveals not only their deep-rooted cultural and philosophical significance, but also their remarkable intertextuality across literary and religious traditions. Both elements—earth, representing stability, fertility, and groundedness, and air, symbolizing intellect, communication, and transcendence—are archetypal motifs that recur throughout global mythologies, spiritual texts, and modern literature. Their use in works like "Angels and Demons" is enriched by this intertextual network, as these symbols act as bridges connecting contemporary narratives to ancient cosmologies and collective cultural memory. Intertextuality intensifies the reading experience by enabling symbols such as earth and air to carry layered meanings, shaped by prior texts and traditions. These symbols are not isolated; they participate in a vast web of references, motifs, and archetypes that allow authors to evoke and reinterpret classic themes, thus expanding the semantic depth of their works. For example, the earth and air elements, present in both Eastern philosophies and Western esoteric traditions, serve as universal signifiers of foundational and transformative forces, and their juxtaposition in literature often mirrors the eternal dualities of materiality and spirit, order and inspiration, good and evil. Ultimately, the intertextuality of earth and air symbols demonstrates that literature is a dynamic dialogue across time and cultures. By embedding these elemental motifs, authors not only enrich their narratives but also invite readers to trace connections, discover new interpretations, and appreciate the enduring power of symbolic language.

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